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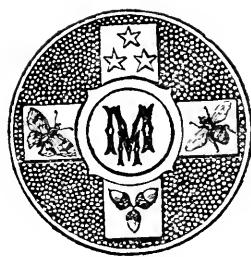
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THE

CLEVER WOMAN OF THE FAMILY.



THE
CLEVER WOMAN OF THE FAMILY.

BY THE
AUTHOR OF "THE HEIR OF REDCLYFFE."

IN TWO VOLUMES.

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THE
CLEVER WOMAN OF THE FAMILY.

CHAPTER I.

G O A N D B R A Y.

“Come, come, elder brother, you are too young in this!”
As You Like It.

“ALICK, I have something to say to you.”

Captain Keith did not choose to let his sister travel alone, when he could help it, and therefore was going to Bath with her, intending to return to Avonchester by the next down train. He made no secret that he thought it a great deal of trouble, and had been for some time asleep, when, at about two stations from Bath, Bessie having shut the little door in the middle of the carriage, thus addressed him, “Alick, I have something to say to you, and I suppose I may as well say it now.”

She pressed upon his knee, and with an affected laziness, he drew his eyes wide open.

“Ah, well, I’ve been a sore plague to you, but I shall be off your hands now.”

“Eh! whose head have you been turning?”

“Alick, what do you think of Lord Keith?”

Alick was awake enough now! “The old ass!” he exclaimed. “But at least you are out of his way now.”

“Not at all. He is coming to Bath to-morrow to see my aunt.”

“And you want me to go out to-morrow and stop him?”

“No, Alick, not exactly. I have been cast about the world too long not to be thankful.”

“Elizabeth!”

“Do not look so very much surprised,” she said, in her sweet pleading way. “May I not be supposed able to feel that noble kindness and gracious manner, and be glad to have some one to look up to?”

“And how about Charlie Carleton?” demanded Alick, turning round full on her.

“For shame, Alick!” she exclaimed hotly; “you who were the one to persecute me about him, and tell me all sorts of things about his being shallow and unprincipled, and not to be thought of, you to bring him up against me now.”

“I might think all you allege,” returned Alick, gravely, “and yet be much amazed at the new project.”

Bessie laughed. “In fact you made a little romance, in which you acted the part of sapient brother, and the poor little sister broke her heart ever after! You wanted such an entertainment when you were lying on the sofa, so you created a heroine and a villain, and thundered down to the rescue.”

“Very pretty, Bessie, but it will not do. It was long after I was well again, and had joined.”

“Then it was the well-considered effect of the musings of your convalescence! When you have a sister to take care of, it is as well to feel that you *are* doing it.”

“Now, Elizabeth,” said her brother, with seriousness not to be laughed aside, and laying his hand on hers, “before I

hear another word on this matter, look me in the face and tell me deliberately that you never cared for Carleton."

"I never thought for one moment of marrying him," said Bessie, haughtily. "If I ever had any sort of mercy on him, it was all to tease you. There, are you satisfied?"

"I must be, I suppose," he replied, and he sighed heavily
"When was this settled?"

"Yesterday, walking up and down the esplanade. He will tell his brother to-day, and I shall write to Lady Temple. Oh, Alick, he is so kind, he spoke so highly of you."

"I must say," returned Alick, in the same grave tone, "that if you wished for the care of an old man, I should have thought my uncle the more agreeable of the two."

"He is little past fifty. You are very hard on him."

"On the contrary, I am sorry for him. You will always find it good for him to do whatever suits yourself."

"Alick?" said his sister mournfully, "you have never forgotten or forgiven my girlish bits of neglect after your wound."

"No, Bessie," he said, holding her hand kindly, "it is not the neglect or the girlishness, but the excuses to me, still more to my uncle, and most of all to yourself. They are what make me afraid for you in what you are going to take upon yourself."

She did not answer immediately, and he pursued—

"Are you driven to this by dislike to living at Bishопs-worthу? If so, do not be afraid to tell me. I will make any arrangement, if you would prefer living with Jane. We agreed once that it would be too expensive, but now I could let you have another hundred a year."

"As if I would allow that, Alick? No, indeed! Lord Keith means you to have all my share."

"Does he? There are more words than one to that question. And pray is he going to provide properly for his poor daughter in the West Indies?"

"I hope to induce him to take her into favour."

"Eh? and to make him give up to Colin Keith that Auchinvar estate that he ought to have had when Archie Keith died?"

"You may be sure I shall do my best for the Colonel. Indeed, I do think Lord Keith will consent to the marriage now."

"You have sacrificed yourself on that account?" he said, with irony in his tone, that he could have repented the next moment, so good-humoured was her reply, "That is understood, so give me the merit."

"The merit of, for his sake, becoming a grandmother. You have thought of the daughters? Mrs. Comyn Menteith must be older than yourself."

"Three years," said Bessie, in his own tone of acceptance of startling facts, "and I shall have seven grandchildren in all, so you see you must respect me."

"Do you know her sentiments?"

"I know what they will be when we have met. Never fear, Alick. If she were not married it might be serious; being so, I have no fears."

Then came a silence, till a halt at the last station before Bath roused Alick again.

"Bessie," he said, in the low voice the stoppage permitted, "don't think me unkind. I believe you have waited on purpose to leave me no time for expostulation, and what I have said has sounded the more harsh in consequence."

"No, Alick," she said, "you are a kind brother in all but the constructions you put upon my doings. I think it would be better if there were more difference between our ages. You are a young guardian, over anxious, and often morbidly fanciful about me during your illness. I think we shall be happier together when you no longer feel yourself responsible."

"The tables turned," muttered Alick.

"I am prepared for misconstruction," added Bessie. "I know it will be supposed to be the title; the estate it cannot be, for you know how poor a property it is; but I do not mean to care for the world. Your opinion is a different thing, and I thought you would have seen that I could not be insensible to such dignified kindness, and the warmth of a nature that many people think cold."

"I don't like set speeches, Bessie."

"Then believe me, Alick. May I not love the fine old man that has been so kind to me?"

"I hope you do," said Alick, slowly.

"And you can't believe it? Not with Lady Temple before you; and hers was *really* an old man."

"Do not talk of her or Sir Stephen either. No, Bessie," he added more calmly after a time, "I may be doing great injustice to you both, but I must speak what it is my duty to say. Lord Keith is a hard, self-seeking man, who has been harsh and grasping towards his family, and I verily believe came here bent on marriage, only because his brother was no longer under his tyranny. He may not be harsh to you, because he is past his vigour, and if he really loves you, you have a power of governing; but from what I know of you, I cannot believe in your loving him enough to make

such management much better than selfish manoeuvring. Therefore I cannot think this marriage for your real welfare, or be other than bitterly grieved at it. Do not answer, Bessie, but think this over, and if at any time this evening you feel the least doubt of your happiness in this matter, telegraph to me, and I will stop him."

"Indeed, Alick," she answered, without anger, "I believe you are very anxious for my good."

It will readily be believed that Captain Keith received no telegram.

Nevertheless, as soon as his time was his own the next morning, he rode to Avonmouth and sought out the Colonel, not perhaps with very defined hopes of making any change in his sister's intentions, but feeling that some attempt on his own part must be made, if only to free himself from acquiescence, and thinking that Colin, as late guardian to the one party, and brother to the other, was the most proper medium.

Colonel Keith was taken by surprise at the manner in which his cordial greeting was met. He himself had been far from displeased at his brother's communication ; it was a great relief to him personally, as well as on Lady Temple's account, and he had been much charmed at Bessie's good sense and engaging graces. As to disparity of years, Lord Keith had really made himself much younger of late, and there was much to excite a girl's romance in the courtesy of an elderly man, the chief of her clan ; moreover the perfect affection and happiness Colin had been used to witness in his general's family disposed him to make light of that objection ; and he perceived that his brother was sufficiently bewitched to be likely to be kind and indulgent to his bride.

He had not expected Alexander Keith to be as well pleased

as he was himself, but he was not prepared for his strong disapprobation, and earnest desire to find some means of prevention, and he began to reassure him upon the placability of Mrs. Comyn Menteith, the daughter, as well as upon his brother's kindness to the objects of his real affection.

“Oh, I am not afraid of that. She will manage him fast enough.”

“Very likely, and for his good. Nor need you question his being a safe guide for her in higher matters. Perhaps you are prejudiced against him because his relations with me have not been happy, but candidly, in them you know the worst of him ; and no doubt he thought himself purely acting for my welfare. I know much more of him now that I have been at home with him, and I was greatly struck with his real consideration for the good of all concerned with him.”

“No, I am not thinking of Lord Keith. To speak it out, I cannot believe that my sister has heart enough in this to justify her.”

“Young girls often are more attracted by elderly men than by lads.”

“You do not know Bessie as, I am sorry to say, I do,” said Alick, speaking slowly and sadly, and with a flush of shame on his cheek. “I do not say that she says anything untrue, but the truth is not in her. She is one of those selfish people who are infinitely better liked [than those five hundred times their worth, because they take care to be always pleased.”

“They give as much pleasure as they take.”

“Yes, they take every one in. I wish to my heart I could be taken in too, but I have seen too much of her avoidance of every service to my uncle that she did not like. I verily

believe, at this moment, that one great inducement with her is to elude the care of him."

"Stern judgments, Alick. I know you would not speak thus without warrant ; but take it into account that marriage makes many a girl's selfishness dual, and at last drowns the self."

"Yes, when it is a marriage of affection. But the truth must be told, Colonel. There was a trumpery idle fellow always loitering at Littleworthy, and playing croquet. I set my face against it with all my might, and she always laughed to scorn the notion that there was anything in it, nor do I believe that she has heart enough to wish to marry him. I could almost say I wish she had, but I never saw her show the same pleasure in any one's attentions, and I believe he is gone out to Rio in hopes of earning means to justify his addresses."

Colonel Keith sat gravely considering what he knew would not be spoken lightly. "Do you mean that there was attachment enough to make it desirable that you should tell my brother ?"

"No, I could say nothing that she could not instantly contradict with perfect truth, though not with perfect sincerity."

"Let me ask you one question, Alick—not a flattering one. May not some of these private impressions of yours have been coloured by your long illness ?"

"That is what Bessie gives every one to understand," said Alick, calmly. "She is right, to a certain degree, that suffering sharpened my perceptions, and helplessness gave me time to draw conclusions. If I had been well, I might have been as much enchanted as other people ; and if my uncle had not needed her care, and been neglected, I could have

thought that I was rendered exacting by illness. But I imagine all I have said is not of the slightest use ; only, if you think it right to tell your brother to talk to me, I would rather stand all the vituperation that would fall on me than allow this to take place."

Colonel Keith walked up and down the room considering, whilst Alick sat in a dejected attitude, shading his face, and not uttering how very bitter it had been to him to make the accusation, nor how dear the sister really was.

" I see no purpose that would be answered," said Colonel Keith, coming to a pause at last ; " you have nothing tangible to mention, even as to the former affair that you suspect. I see a great deal in your view of her to make you uneasy, but nothing that would not be capable of explanation, above all to such a man as my brother. It would appear like mere malevolence."

" Never mind what it would appear," said Alick, who was evidently in such a ferment as his usually passive demeanour would have seemed incapable of.

" If the appearance would entirely baffle the purpose, it *must* be considered," said the Colonel ; " and in this case it could only lead to estrangement, which would be a lasting evil. I conclude that you have remonstrated with your sister."

" As much as she gave me time for ; but of course that is breath spent in vain."

" Your uncle had the same means of judging as yourself."

" No, Colonel, he could do nothing ! In the first place, there can be no correspondence with him ; and next, he is so devotedly fond of Bessie, that he would no more believe any-

thing against her than Lady Temple would. I have tried that more than once."

"Then, Alick, there is nothing for it but to let it take its course ; and even upon your own view, your sister will be much safer married than single."

"I had very little expectation of your saying anything else, but in common honesty I felt bound to let you know."

"And now the best thing to be done is to forget all you have said."

"Which you will do the more easily as you think it an amiable delusion of mine. Well, so much the better. I dare say you will never think otherwise, and I would willingly believe that my senses went after my fingers' ends."

The Colonel almost believed so himself. He was aware of the miserably sensitive condition of shattered nerve in which Alick had been sent home, and of the depression of spirits that had ensued on the news of his father's death ; and he thought it extremely probable that his weary hours and solicitude for his gay young sister might have made mole-hills into mountains, and that these now weighed on his memory and conscience. At least, this seemed the only way of accounting for an impression so contrary to that which Bessie Keith made on every one else, and, by his own avowal, on the uncle whom he so much revered. Every other voice proclaimed her winning, amiable, obliging, considerate, and devoted to the service of her friends, with much drollery and shrewdness of perception, tempered by kindness of heart and unwillingness to give pain ; and on that sore point of residence with the blind uncle, it was quite possibly a

bit of Alick's exaggerated feeling to imagine the arrangement so desirable—the young lady might be the better judge.

On the whole, the expostulation left Colonel Keith more uncomfortable on Alick's account than on that of his brother.

CHAPTER II.

A N APPARITION.

“ And there will be auld Geordie Tanner,
Who coft a young wife wi’ his gowd.”

JOANNA BAILLIE.

“ MAMMA,” quoth Leoline, “ I thought a woman must not marry her grandfather. And she called him the patriarch of her clan.”

“ He is a cross old man,” added Hubert. “ He said children ought not to be allowed on the esplanade, because he got into the way as I was pushing the perambulator.”

“ This was the reason,” said Francis, gravely, “ that she stopped me from braying at him. I shall know what people are at, when they talk of disrespect another time.”

“ Don’t talk of her,” cried Conrade, flinging himself round; “ women have no truth in them.”

“ Except the dear, darling, delightful mammy !” And the larger proportion of boys precipitated themselves headlong upon her, so that any one but a mother would have been buffeted out of breath in their struggles for embracing ground; and even Lady Temple found it a relief when Hubert, having been squeezed out, bethought himself of extending the honourable exception to Miss Williams, and

thus effected a diversion. What would have been the young gentlemen's reception of his lordship's previous proposal !

Yet in the fulness of her gladness the inconsistent widow, who had thought Lord Keith so much too old for herself, gave her younger friend heartfelt congratulations upon the blessing of being under fatherly direction and guidance. She was entrusted with the announcement to Rachel, who received it with a simple "Indeed !" and left her cousin unmolested in her satisfaction, having long relegated Fanny to the class of women who think having a friend about to be married, the next best thing to being married themselves, no matter to whom.

"Aspirations in women are mere delusions," was her compensating sigh to Grace. "There is no truer saying, than that a woman will receive every man."

"I have always been glad that is aprocruphal," said Grace, "and Eastern women have no choice."

"Nor are Western women better than Eastern," said Rachel. "It is all circumstances. No mental power or acuteness has in any instance that I have yet seen, been able to balance the propensity to bondage. The utmost flight is, that the attachment should not be unworthy."

"I own that I am very much surprised," said Grace.

"I am not at all," said Rachel. "I have given up hoping better things. I was beginning to have a high opinion of Bessie Keith's capabilities, but womanhood was at the root all the time ; and, as her brother says, she has had great disadvantages, and I can make excuses for her. She had not her heart filled with one definite scheme of work and usefulness, such as deters the trifling and designing."

"Like the F. U. E. E.?"

“Yes, the more I see of the fate of other women, the more thankful I am that my vocation has taken a formed and developed shape.”

And thus Rachel could afford to speak without severity of the match, though she abstained from congratulation. She did not see Captain Keith for the next few days, but at last the two sisters met him at the Cathedral door as they were getting into the carriage after a day’s shopping at Avonchester; and Grace offered her congratulations, in accordance with her mother’s old fashioned code.

“Thank you,” he said; then turning to Rachel, “Did she write to you?”

“No.”

“I thought not.”

There was something marked in his tone, but his sister’s silence was not of long duration, for a letter arrived containing orders for lace, entreating that a high pressure might be put on Mrs. Kelland, and containing beauteous devices for the veil, which was to be completed in a fearfully short time since the wedding was to be immediate, in order that Lord Keith might spend Christmas and the ensuing cold months abroad. It was to take place at Bath, and was to be as quiet as possible; “or else,” wrote Miss Keith, “I should have been enchanted to have overcome your reluctance to witness the base surrender of female rights. I am afraid you are only too glad to be let off, only don’t thank me, but circumstances.”

Rachel’s principles revolted at the quantity of work demanded of the victims to lace, and Grace could hardly obtain leave to consult Mrs. Kelland. But she snapped at the order, for the honour and glory of the thing, and undertook through

the ramifications of her connexion to obtain the whole bridal array complete. “For such a pleasant-spoken lady as Miss Keith, she would sit up all night rather than disappoint her.”

The most implacable person of all was the old house-keeper, Tibbie. She had been warmly attached to Lady Keith, and resented her having a successor, and one younger than her daughters ; and above all, ever since the son and heir had died, she had reckoned on her own Master Colin coming to the honours of the family, and regarded this new marriage as a crossing of Providence. She vainly endeavoured to stir up Master Colin to remonstrate on his brother’s “makin’ siccan a fule’s bargain wi’ yon glaikit lass. My certie, but he’ll hae the warst o’t, honest man ; rinnin’ after her, wi’ a’ her whigmaleries an’ cantrips. He’ll rue the day that e’er he bowed his noble head to the likes o’ her, I’m jalousin.”

It was to no purpose to remind her that the bride was a Keith in blood ; her great grandfather a son of the house of Gowanbrae ; all the subsequent descendants brave soldiers.

“A Keith ca’ ye her ! It’s a queer kin’ o’ Keiths she’s comed o’, nae better nor Englishers that haena sae muckle’s set fit in our bonny Scotland ; an’ sic sciechin’, skirlin’ tongues as they hae, a body wad need to be gleg i’ the uptak to understan’ a word they say. Tak’ my word for’t, Maister Colin, it’s no a’thegither luve for his lordship’s grey hairs that gars yon gilpy lassock seek to become my Leddy Keith.”

“Nay, Tibbie, if you find fault with such a sweet, winning young creature, I shall think it is all because you will not endure a mistress at Gowanbrae over you.”

“His lordship ’ll please himsel’ wi’ a leddy to be mistress

o' Gowenbrae, but auld Tibbie 'll never cross the doorstane mair."

"Indeed you will, Tibbie; here are my brother's orders that you should go down, as soon as you can conveniently make ready, and see about the new plenishing."

"They may see to the plenishin' that's to guide it after han, an' that'll no be me. My lord 'll behove to tak' his orders aff his young leddy ance he's married on her, may be a whilie afore, but that's no to bind ither folk, an' it's no to be thought that at my years I'm to be puttin' up wi' a' ther new fangled English fykes an' nonsense maggots. Na, na, Maister Colin, his lordship 'll fend weel aneugh wantin' Tibbie; an' what for suld I leave yerself, an' you settin' up wi' a house o' yer ain? Deed an' my mind's made up, I'll e'en bide wi' ye, an' nae mair about it."

"Stay, stay," cried Colin, a glow coming into his cheeks, "don't reckon without your host, Tibbie. Do you think Gowenbrae the second is never to have any mistress but yourself?"

"Haud awa' wi' ye, laddie, I ken fine what ye're ettin' at, but yon's a braw leddy, no like thae English folk, but a woman o' understandin', an' mair by token I'm thinkin' she'll be gleg aneugh to ken a body that 'll serve her weel, an' see to the guidin' o' thae feckless queans o' servant lasses, for bad's the best o' them ye'll fin' hereawa'. Nae fear but her an' me 'll put it up weel thegither, an' a' gude be wi' ye baith."

After this Colin resigned himself and his household to Tibbie's somewhat despotic government, at least for the present. To Ermine's suggestion that her appellation hardly suited the dignity of her station, he replied that Isabel was

too romantic for southern ears ; and that her surname being the same as his own, he was hardly prepared to have the title of Mrs. Keith pre-occupied. So after Mrs. Curtis's example, the world for the most part knew the colonel's housekeeper as Mrs. Tibbs.

She might be a tyrant, but liberties were taken with her territory ; for almost the first use that the colonel made of his house was to ask a rheumatic sergeant, who had lately been invalided, to come and benefit by the Avonmouth climate. Scottish hospitality softened Tibbie's heart, and when she learnt that Sergeant O'Brien had helped to carry Master Colin into camp after his wound, she thought nothing too good for him. The colonel then ventured to add to the party an exemplary consumptive tailor from Mr. Mitchell's parish, who might yet be saved by good living and good air. Some growls were elicited, but he proved to be so deplorably the ninetieth rather than the ninth part of a man, that Tibbie made it her point of honour to fatten him ; and the sergeant found him such an intelligent auditor of the Indian exploits of the —th Highlanders that mutual respect was fully established, and high politeness reigned supreme, even though the tailor could never be induced to delight in the porridge, on which the sergeant daily complimented the housekeeper in original and magnificent metaphors.

Nor had the Colonel any anxieties in leaving the representatives of the three nations together while he went to attend his brother's wedding. He proposed that Tibbie should conduct Rose for the daily walk of which he had made a great point, thinking that the child did not get exercise enough, since she was so averse to going alone upon the esplanade that her aunt forbore to press it. She

manifested the same reluctance to going out with Tibbie, and this the Colonel ascribed to her fancying herself too old to be under the charge of a nurse. It was trying to laugh her out of her dignity, but without eliciting an answer, when, one afternoon just as they were entering together upon the esplanade, he felt her hand tighten upon his own with a nervous frightened clutch, as she pressed tremulously to his side.

“ What is it, my dear ? That dog is not barking at you. He only wants to have a stick thrown into the sea for him.”

“ Oh not the dog ! It was——”

“ Was, what ?”

“ *Him !* ” gasped Rose.

“ Who ?” inquired the Colonel, far from prepared for the reply, in a terrified whisper,—

“ Mr. Maddox.”

“ My dear child ! Which, where ?”

“ He is gone ! he is past. Oh, don’t turn back ! Don’t let me see him again.”

“ You don’t suppose he could hurt you, my dear.”

“ No,” hesitated Rose, “ not with you.”

“ Nor with any one.”

“ I suppose not,” said Rose, common sense reviving, though her grasp was not relaxed.

“ Would it distress you very much to try to point him out to me ?” said the Colonel, in his irresistibly sweet tone.

“ I will. Only keep hold of my hand, pray,” and the little hand trembled so much that he felt himself committing a cruel action in leading her along the esplanade, but there was no fresh start of recognition, and when they had gone the

whole length, she breathed more freely, and said, "No, he was not there."

Recollecting how young she had been at the time of Maddox's treason, the Colonel began to doubt if her imagination had not raised a bugbear, and he questioned her, "My dear, why are you so much afraid of this person? What do you know about him?"

"He told wicked stories of my papa," said Rose, very low.

"True, but he could not hurt you. You don't think he goes about like Red Ridinghood's wolf?"

"No, I am not so silly now."

"Are you sure you know him? Did you often see him in your papa's house?"

"No, he was always in the laboratory, and I might not go there."

"Then you see, Rose, it must be mere fancy that you saw him, for you could not even know him by sight."

"It was not fancy," said Rose, gentle and timid as ever, but still obviously injured at the tone of reproof.

"My dear child," said Colonel Keith, with some exertion of patience, "you must try to be reasonable. How can you possibly recognise a man that you tell me you never saw?"

"I said I never saw him in the house," said Rose with a shudder; "but they said if ever I told they would give me to the lions in the Zoological Gardens."

"Who said so?"

"He, Mr. Maddox and Maria," she answered, in such trepidation that he could scarcely hear her.

"But you are old and wise enough now to know what a foolish and wicked threat that was, my dear."

"Yes, I was a little girl then, and knew no better, and

once I did tell a lie when mamma asked me, and now she is dead, and I can never tell her the truth."

Colin dreaded a public outbreak of the sobs that heaved in the poor child's throat, but she had self-control enough to restrain them till he had led her into his own library, where he let her weep out her repentance for the untruth, which, wrested from her by terror, had weighed so long on her conscience. He felt that he was sparing Ermine something by receiving the first tempest of tears, in the absolute terror and anguish of revealing the secret that had preyed on her with mysterious horror. "Now tell me all about it, my dear little girl. Who was this Maria?"

"Maria was my nurse when I lived at home. She used to take me out walking," said Rose, pressing closer to his protecting breast, and pausing as though still afraid of her own words.

"Well," he said, beginning to perceive, "and was it then that you saw this Maddox?"

"Yes, he used to come and walk with us, and sit under the trees in Kensington Gardens with her. And sometimes he gave me lemon-drops, but they said if ever I told, the lions should have me. I used to think I might be saved like Daniel; but after I told the lie, I knew I should not. Mamma asked me why my fingers were sticky, and I did say it was from a lemon-drop, but there were Maria's eyes looking at me; oh, so dreadful, and when mamma asked who gave it to me, and Maria said, 'I did, did not I, Miss Rose?' Oh, I did not seem able to help saying 'yes.'"

"Poor child! And you never dared to speak of it again?"

"Oh, no! I did long to tell; but, oh, one night it was written up in letters of fire, 'Beware of the Lions.'"

"Terror must have set you dreaming, my dear."

"No," said Rose, earnestly. "I was quite awake. Papa and mamma were gone out to dine and sleep, and Maria would put me to bed half an hour too soon. She read me to sleep, but by and by I woke up, as I always did at mamma's bed time, and the candle was gone, and there were those dreadful letters in light over the door."

She spoke with such conviction that he became persuaded that all was not delusion, and asked what she did.

"I jumped up, and screamed, and opened the door; but there they were growling in papa's dressing-room."

"They, the lions? Oh, Rose, you must know that was impossible."

"No, I did not *see* any lions, but I heard the growl, and Mr. Maddox coughed, and said, 'Here they come,' and growled again."

"And you——?"

"I tumbled into bed again, and rolled up my head in the clothes, and prayed that it might be day, and it was at last!"

"Poor child! Indeed, Rose, I do not wonder at your terror, I never heard of a more barbarous trick."

"Was it a trick?" said Rose, raising a wonderfully relieved and hopeful face.

"Did you never hear of writing in phosphorus, a substance that shines at night as the sea sometimes does?"

"Aunt Ailie has a book with a story about writing in fiery letters, but it frightened me so much that I never read to the end."

"Bring it to me, and we will read it together, and then you will see that such a cruel use can be made of phosphorus."

“It was unkind of them,” said Rose, sadly, “I wonder if they did it for fun !”

“Where did you sleep ?”

“I had a little room that opened into mamma’s.”

“And where was all this growling ?”

“In papa’s room. The door was just opposite to mine, and was open. All the light was there, you know. Mamma’s room was dark, but there was a candle in the dressing-room.”

“Did you see anything ?”

“Only the light. It was such a moment. I don’t *think* I saw Mr. Maddox, but I am quite certain I heard him, for he had an odd little cough.”

“Then, Rose, I have little doubt that all this cruelty to you, poor inoffensive little being, was to hide some plots against your father.”

She caught his meaning with the quickness of a mind precocious on some points though childish on others. “Then if I had been brave and told the truth, he might never have hurt papa.”

“Mind, I do not know, and I never thought of blaming you, the chief sufferer ! No, don’t begin to cry again.”

“Ah ! but I did tell a lie. And I never can confess it to mamma,” she said, recurring to the sad lament so long suppressed.

She found a kind comforter, who led her to the higher sources of consolation, feeling all the time the deep self-accusation with which the sight of sweet childish penitence must always inspire a grown person.

“And now you will not fear to tell your aunt,” he added, “only it should be when you can mention it without such sad crying.”

“Telling you is almost as good as telling her,” said Rose, “and I feel safe with you,” she added, caressingly drawing his arm round her. “Please tell Aunt Ermine, for my crying does give her *such* a headache.”

“I will, then, and I think when we all know it, the terrors will leave you.”

“Not when I see Mr. Maddox. Oh, please now you know why, don’t make me walk without you. I do *know* now that he could not do anything to me, but I can’t help feeling the fright. And, oh! if he was to speak to me!”

“You have not seen him here before?”

“Yes I have, at least I think so. Once when Aunt Ermine sent me to the post-office, and another time on the esplanade. That is why I can’t bear going out without you or Aunt Ailie. Indeed, it is not disliking Tibbie.”

“I see it is not, my dear, and we will say no more about it till you have conquered your alarm; but remember, that he is not likely to know you again. You must be more changed in these three years than he is.”

This consideration seemed to reassure Rose greatly, and her next inquiry was, “Please, are my eyes very red for going home?”

“Somewhat mottled—something of the York and Lancaster rose. Shall I leave you under Tibbie’s care till the maiden blush complexion returns, and come back and fetch you when you have had a grand exhibition of my Indian curiosities?”

“Have you Indian curiosities? I thought they were only for ladies?”

“Perhaps they are. Is Tibbie guard enough? You know

there's an Irish sergeant in the house taller than I am, if you want a garrison?"

"Oh, I am not afraid, only these eyes."

"I will tell her you have been frightened, and she shall take no notice."

Tibbie was an admirer of Rose and gladly made her welcome, while the Colonel repaired to Ermine, and greatly startled her by the disclosure of the miseries that had been inflicted on the sensitive child.

It had indeed been known that there had been tyranny in the nursery, and to this cause the aunts imputed the startled wistful expression in Rose's eyes; but they had never questioned her, thinking that silence would best wear out the recollection. The only wonder was that her senses had not been permanently injured by that night of terror, which accounted for her unconquerable dread of sleeping in the dark; and a still more inexplicable horror of the Zoological Gardens, together with many a nervous misery that Ermine had found it vain to combat. The colonel asked if the nurse's cruelty had been the cause of her dismissal?

"No, it was not discovered till after her departure. Her fate has always been a great grief to us, though we little thought her capable of using Rose in this way. She was one of the Hathertons. You must remember the name, and the pretty picturesque hovel on the Heath."

"The squatters that were such a grievance to my uncle. Always suspected of poaching, and never caught."

"Exactly. Most of the girls turned out ill, but this one, the youngest, was remarkably intelligent and attractive at school. I remember making an excuse for calling her into the garden for you to see and confess that English beauty

exceeded Scottish, and you called her a gipsy and said we had no right to her."

"So it was those big black eyes that had that fiendish malice in them!"

"Ah! if she fell into Maddox's hands, I wonder the less. She showed an amount of feeling about my illness that won Ailie's heart, and we had her for a little handmaid to help my nurse. Then, when we broke up from home, we still kept her, and every one used to be struck with her looks and manner. She went on as well as possible, and Lucy set her heart on having her in the nursery. And when the upper nurse went away, she had the whole care of Rose. We heard only of her praises till, to our horror, we found she had been sent away in disgrace at a moment's warning. Poor Lucy was young, and so much shocked as only to think of getting her out of the house, not of what was to become of her, and all we could learn was that she never went home."

"How long was this before the crash?"

"It was only a few weeks before the going abroad, but they had been absent nearly a year. No doubt Maddox must have made her aid in his schemes. You say Rose saw him?"

"So she declares, and there is an accuracy of memory about her that I should trust to. Should you or Alison know him?"

"No, we used to think it a bad sign that Edward never showed him to us. I remember Alison being disappointed that he was not at the factory the only time she saw it."

"I do not like going away while he may be lurking about. I could send a note to-night, explaining my absence."

“No, no,” exclaimed Ermine, “that would be making me as bad as poor little Rose. If he be here ever so much he has done his worst, and Edward is out of his reach. What could he do to us? The affairs were wound up long ago, and we have literally nothing to be bullied out of. No, I don’t think he could make me believe in lions in any shape.”

“You strong-minded woman! You want to emulate the Rachel.”

“You have brought her,” laughed Ermine at the sound of the well-known knock, and Rachel entered bag in hand.

“I was in hopes of meeting you,” she said to the colonel. “I wanted to ask you to take charge of some of these;” and she produced a packet of prospectuses of a “Journal of Female Industry,” an illustrated monthly magazine, destined to contain essays, correspondence, reviews, history, tales, etc., to be printed and illustrated in the F. U. E. E.

“I hoped,” said Rachel, “to have begun with the year, but we are not forward enough, and indeed some of the expenses require a subscription in advance. A subscriber in advance will have the year’s numbers for ten shillings, instead of twelve; and I should be much obliged if you would distribute a few of these at Bath, and ask Bessie to do the same. I shall set her name down at the head of the list, as soon as she has qualified it for a decoy.”

“Are these printed at the F. U. E. E.?”

“No, we have not funds as yet. Mr. Mauleverer had them done at Bristol, where he has a large connexion as a lecturer, and expects to get many subscribers. I brought these down as soon as he had left them with me, in hopes that you would kindly distribute them at the wedding. And

I wished," added she to Ermine, "to ask you to contribute to our first number."

"Thank you," and the doubtful tone induced Rachel to encourage her diffidence.

"I know you write a great deal, and I am sure you must produce something worthy to see the light. I have no scruple in making the request, as I know Colonel Keith agrees with me that womanhood need not be an extinguisher for talent."

"I am not afraid of him," Ermine managed to say without more smile than Rachel took for gratification.

"Then if you would only entrust me with some of your fugitive reflections, I have no doubt that something might be made of them. A practised hand," she added with a certain editorial dignity, "can always polish away any little roughnesses from inexperience."

Ermine was choking with laughter at the savage pulls that Colin was inflicting on his moustache, and feeling silence no longer honest, she answered in an odd under tone, "I can't plead inexperience."

"No!" cried Rachel. "You have written; you have not published!"

"I was forced to do whatever brought grist to the mill," said Ermine. "Indeed," she added, with a look as if to ask pardon; "our secrets have been hardly fair towards you, but we made it a rule not to spoil our breadwinner's trade by confessing my enormities."

"I assure you," said the Colonel, touched by Rachel's appalled look, "I don't know how long this cautious person would have kept me in the dark if she had not betrayed herself in the paper we discussed the first day I met you."

“The ‘Traveller,’ ” said Rachel, her eyes widening like those of a child. “She is the ‘Invalid’ !”

“There, I am glad to have made a clean breast of it,” said Ermine.

“The ‘Invalid’ !” repeated Rachel. “It is as bad as the Victoria Cross.”

“There is a compliment, Ermine, for which you should make your bow,” said Colin.

“Oh, I did not mean that,” said Rachel; “but that it was as great a mistake as I made about Captain Keith, when I told him his own story, and denied his being the hero, till I actually saw his cross;” and she spoke with a genuine simplicity that almost looked like humour, ending with, “I wonder why I am fated to make such mistakes !”

“Preconceived notions,” said Ermine, smiling; “your theory suffices you, and you don’t see small indications.”

“There may be something in that,” said Rachel, thoughtfully, “it accounts for Grace always seeing things faster than I did.”

“Did Mr. ——, your philanthropist, bring you this to-day ?” said the Colonel, taking up the paper again, as if to point a practical moral to her confession of misjudgments.”

“Mr. Mauleverer ? Yes ; I came down as soon as he had left me, only calling first upon Fanny. I am very anxious for contributions. If you would only give me a paper signed by the ‘Invalid,’ it would be a fortune to the institution.”

Ermine made a vague answer that she doubted whether the ‘Invalid’ was separable from the ‘Traveller,’ and Rachel presently departed with her prospectus, but without having elicited a promise.

“Intolerable !” exclaimed the Colonel. “She was im-

proving under Bessie's influence, but she has broken out worse than ever. 'Journal of Female Industry !' 'Journal of a Knight of Industry,' might be a better title. You will have nothing to do with it, Ermine ?"

"Certainly not as the 'Invalid,' but I owe her something for having let her run into this scrape before you."

"As if you could have hindered her ! Come, don't waste time and brains on a companion for Curatocult."

"You make me so idle and frivolous that I shall be expelled from the 'Traveller,' and obliged to take refuge in the 'Female Industry Journal.' Shall you distribute the prospectuses ?"

"I shall give one to Bessie ! That is if I go at all."

"No, no ; there is no valid reason for staying away. Even if we were sure that Rose was right, nothing could well come of it, and your absence would be most invidious."

"I believe I am wanted to keep Master Alick in order, but if you have the least feeling that you would be more at ease with me at home——"

"That is not a fair question," said Ermine, smiling. "You know very well that you ought to go."

"And I shall try to bring back Harry Beauchamp," added the Colonel. "He would be able to identify the fellow."

"I do not know what would be gained by that."

"I should know whom to watch."

Ermine had seen so much of Rose's nervous timidity, and had known so many phantoms raised by it, that she attached little importance to the recognition, and when she went over the matter with her little niece, it was with far more thought of the effect of the terror, and of the long suppressed secret, upon the child's moral and physical nature, than with any

curiosity as to the subject of her last alarm. She was surprised to observe that Alison was evidently in a state of much more restlessness and suspense than she was conscious of in herself, during Colin's absence, and attributed this to her sister's fear of Maddox's making some inroad upon her in her long solitary hours, in which case she tried to reassure her by promises to send at once for Mr. Mitchell or for Coombe.

Alison let these assurances be given to her, and felt hypocritical for receiving them in silence. Her grave set features had tutored themselves to conceal for ever one page in the life that Ermine thought was entirely revealed to her. Never had Ermine known that brotherly companionship had once suddenly assumed the unwelcome aspect of an affection against which Alison's heart had been steeled by devotion to the sister whose life she had blighted. Her resolution had been unswerving, but its full cost had been unknown to her, till her adherence to it had slackened the old tie of hereditary friendship towards others of her family ; and even when marriage should have obliterated the past, she still traced resentment in the hard judgment of her brother's conduct, and even in the one act of consideration that it galled her to accept.

There had been no meeting since the one decisive interview just before she had left her original home, and there were many more bitter feelings than could be easily assuaged in looking forward to a renewal of intercourse, when all too late, she knew that she should soon be no longer needed by her sister. She tried to feel it all just retribution ; she tried to rejoice in Ermine's coming happiness ; she tried to believe that the sight of Harry Beauchamp, as a married man, would be the best cure for her ; she blamed and struggled with herself : and after all, her distress was

wasted, Harry Beauchamp had not chosen to come home with his cousin, who took his unwillingness to miss a hunting-day rather angrily and scornfully. Alison put her private interpretation on the refusal, and held aloof, while Colin owned to Ermine his vexation and surprise at the displeasure that Harry Beauchamp maintained against his old school-fellow, and his absolute refusal to listen to any arguments as to his innocence.

This seemed to have been Colin's prominent interest in his expedition to Bath ; the particulars of the wedding were less easily drawn from him. The bride had indeed been perfection, all was charming wherever she brought her ready grace and sweetness, and she had gratified the Colonel by her affectionate messages to Ermine, and her evident intention to make all straight between Lord Keith and his daughter Mary. But the Clare relations had not made a favourable impression ; the favourite blind uncle had not been present, in spite of Bessie's boast, and it was suspected that Alick had not chosen to forward his coming. Alick had devolved the office of giving his sister away upon the Colonel, as her guardian, and had altogether comported himself with more than his usual lazy irony, especially towards the Clare cousinhood, who constantly buzzed round him, and received his rebuffs as delightful jests and compliments, making the Colonel wonder all the more at the perfect good taste and good breeding of his new sister-in-law, who had spent among them all the most critical years of her life.

She had been much amused with the prospectus of the "Journal of Female Industry," but she sent word to Rachel that she advised her not to publish any list of subscribers—the vague was far more impressive than the certain. The

first number must be sent to her at Paris, and trust her for spreading its fame !

The Colonel did not add to his message her recommendation that the frontispiece should represent the Spinster's Needles, with the rescue of Don as the type of female heroism. Nor did he tell how carefully he had questioned both her and Rachel as to the date of that interesting adventure.

CHAPTER III.

THE SIEGE.

“The counterfeit presentment.”—*Hamlet*.

CHRISTMAS came, and Rachel agreed with Mr. Mauleverer that it was better not to unsettle the children at the F.U.E.E. by permitting them to come home for holidays, a decision which produced much discontent in their respective families. Alison, going to Mrs. Morris with her pupils, to take her a share of Christmas good cheer, was made the receptacle of a great lamentation over the child’s absence; and, moreover, that the mother had not been allowed to see her alone, when taken by Miss Rachel to the F.U.E.E.

“Some one ought to take it up,” said Alison, as she came home, in her indignation. “Who knows what may be done to those poor children? Can’t Mr. Mitchell do something?”

But Mr. Mitchell was not sufficiently at home to interfere. He was indeed negotiating an exchange with Mr. Touchett, but until this was effected he could hardly meddle in the matter, and he was besides a reserved, prudent man, slow to commit himself, so that his own impression of the asylum could not be extracted from him. Here, however, Colonel Keith put himself forward. He had often been asked by Rachel to visit the F.U.E.E., and he surprised and relieved Alison by announcing his intention of going over to St.

Norbert's alone and without notice, so as to satisfy himself as far as might be as to the treatment of the inmates, and the genuineness of Mauleverer's pretensions.

He had, however, to wait for weather that would not make the adventure one of danger to him, and he regarded the cold and rain with unusual impatience, until, near the end of January, he was able to undertake his expedition.

After much knocking and ringing the door was opened to him by a rude, slatternly, half-witted looking charwoman, or rather girl, who said "Master was not in," and nearly shut the door in his face. However, he succeeded in sending in his card, backed by the mention of Lady Temple and Miss Curtis ; and this brought out Mrs. Rawlins, her white streamers floating stiff behind her, full of curtsies and regrets at having to refuse any friend of Miss Curtis, but Mr. Mauleverer's orders were precise and could not be infringed. He was gone to lecture at Bristol, but if the gentleman would call at any hour he would fix to-morrow or next day, Mr. Mauleverer would be proud to wait on him.

When he came at the appointed time, all was in the normal state of the institution. The two little girls in white pinafores sat upon their bench with their books before them, and their matron presiding over them ; Mr. Mauleverer stood near, benignantly attentive to the children and obligingly so to the visitor, volunteering information and answering all questions. Colonel Keith tried to talk to the children, but when he asked one of them whether she liked drawing better than lace-making her lips quivered, and Mrs. Rawlins replied for her, that she was never happy except with a pencil in her hand. "Show the gentleman, my dear," and out came a book of studies of cubes, globes, posts, etc., while Mr. Maule-

verer talked artistically of drawing from models. Next, he observed on a certain suspicious blackness of little Mary's eye, and asked her what she had done to herself. But the child hung her head, and Mrs. Rawlins answered for her, "Ah! Mary is ashamed to tell: but the gentleman will think nothing of it, my dear. He knows that children will be children, and I cannot bear to check them, the dears."

More briefly Mr. Mauleverer explained that Mary had fallen while playing on the stairs; and with this superficial inspection he must needs content himself, though on making inquiry at the principal shops, he convinced himself that neither Mr Mauleverer nor the F.U.E.E. were as well known at St. Norbert's as at Avonmouth. He told Rachel of his expedition, and his interest in her work gratified her, though she would have preferred being his cicerone. She assured him that he must have been very much pleased, especially with the matron.

"She is a handsome woman, and reminds me strongly of a face I saw in India."

"There are some classes of beauty and character that have a remarkable sameness of feature," began Rachel.

"Don't push that theory, for your matron's likeness was a very handsome Sepoy havildar whom we took at Lucknow; a capital soldier before the mutiny, and then an ineffable ruffian."

"The mutiny was an infectious frenzy; so that you establish nothing against that cast of countenance."

Never, indeed, was there more occasion for perseverance in Rachel's championship. Hitherto Mrs. Kelland had been nailed to her pillow by the exigencies of Lady Keith's outfit, and she and her minions had toiled unremittingly, without a

thought beyond their bobbins, but as soon as the postponed orders were in train, and the cash for the wedding veil and flounces had been transmitted, the good woman treated herself and her daughters to a holiday at St. Norbert's, without intimating her intention to her patronesses ; and the consequence was a formal complaint of her ungrateful and violent language to Mrs. Rawlins on being refused admission to the asylum without authority from Mr. Mauleverer or Miss Curtis.

Rachel, much displeased, went down charged with reproof and representation, but failed to produce the desired effect upon the aunt.

“ It was not right,” Mrs. Kelland reiterated, “ that the poor lone orphan should not see her that was as good as a mother, when she had no one else to look to. They that kept her from her didn’t do it for no good end.”

“ But, Mrs. Kelland, rules are rules.”

“ Don’t tell me of no rules, Miss Rachel, as would cut a poor child off from her friends as her mother gave her to on her death-bed. ‘ Sally,’ says she, ‘ I know you will do a mother’s part by that poor little maid ;’ and so I did till I was over persuaded to let her go to that there place.”

“ Indeed you have nothing to regret there, Mrs. Kelland ; you know, that with the kindest intentions, you could not make the child happy.”

“ And why was that, ma’am, but because her mother was a poor creature from town, that had never broke her to her work. I never had the trouble with a girl of my own I had with her. ‘ It’s all for your good, Lovedy,’ I says to her, and poor child, maybe she wishes herself back again.”

“ I assure you, I always find the children well and happy,

and it is very unfair on the matron to be angry with her for being bound by rules, to which she must submit, or she would transgress the regulations under which we have laid her ! It is not her choice to exclude you, but her duty.”

“ Please, ma’am, was it her duty to be coming out of the house in a ’gentle coloured silk dress, and a drab bonnet with a pink feather in it ? ” said Mrs. Kelland, with a certain air of simplicity, that provoked Rachel to answer sharply—

“ You don’t know what you are talking about, Mrs. Kelland.”

“ Well, ma’am, it was a very decent woman as told me, an old lady of the name of Drinkwater, as keeps a baker’s shop on the other side of the way, and she never sees bread enough go in for a cat to make use of, let alone three poor hungry children. She says all is not right there, ma’am.”

“ Oh, that must be mere gossip and spite at not having the custom. It quite accounts for what she may say, and indeed you brought it all on yourself by not having asked me for a note. You must restrain yourself. What you may say to me is of no importance, but you must not go and attack those who are doing the very best for your niece.”

Rachel made a dignified exit, but before she had gone many steps, she was assailed by tearful Mrs. Morris : “ Oh, Miss Rachel, if it would not be displeasing to you, would you give me an order for my child to come home. Ours is a poor place, but I would rather make any shift for us to live than that she should be sent away to some place beyond sea.”

“ Some place beyond sea ! ”

“ Yes, ma’am. I beg your pardon, ma’am, but they do say that Mr. Maw-and-liver is a kidnapper, ma’am, and that he gets them poor children to send out to Botany Bay to be

wives to the convicts as are transported, Miss Rachel, if you'll excuse it. They say there's a whole shipload of them at Plymouth, and I'd rather my poor Mary came to the Union at home than to the like of that, Miss Rachel."

This alarm, being less reasonable, was even more difficult to talk down than Mrs. Kelland's, and Rachel felt as if there were a general conspiracy to drive her distracted, when on going home she found the drawing-room occupied by a pair of plump, paddy-looking old friends, who had evidently talked her mother into a state of nervous alarm. On her entrance, Mrs. Curtis begged the gentleman to tell dear Rachel what he had been saying, but this he contrived to avoid, and only on his departure was Rachel made aware that he and his wife had come, fraught with tidings that she was fostering a Jesuit in disguise, that Mrs. Rawlins was a lady abbess of a new order, Rachel herself in danger of being entrapped, and the whole family likely to be entangled in the mysterious meshes, which, as good Mrs. Curtis more than once repeated, would be "such a dreadful thing for poor Fanny and the boys."

Her daughters, by soothing and argument, allayed the alarm, though the impression was not easily done away with, and they feared that it might yet cost her a night's rest. These attacks—absurd as they were—induced Rachel to take measures for their confutation, by writing to Mr. Mauleverer, that she thought it would be well to allow the pupils to pay a short visit to their homes, so as to satisfy their friends.

She did not receive an immediate answer, and was beginning to feel vexed and anxious, though not doubtful, when Mr. Mauleverer arrived, bringing two beautiful little wood-cuts, as illustrations for the "Journal of Female Industry." They were entitled "The free maids that weave their thread

with bones," and one called "the Ideal," represented a latticed cottage window, with roses, honeysuckles, cat, beehives, and all conventional rural delights, around a pretty maiden singing at her lace-pillow; while the other yclept the "Real," showed a den of thin, wizened, half-starved girls, cramped over their cushions in a lace-school. The design was Mr. Mauleverer's, the execution the children's; and neatly mounted on cards, the performance did them great credit; and there was great justice in Mr. Mauleverer's view that while they were making such progress, it would be a great pity to interrupt the preparation of the first number by sending the children home even for a few hours. Rachel consented the more readily to the postponement of the holiday, as she had now something to show in evidence of the reality of their doings, and she laid hands upon the cuts, in spite of Mr. Mauleverer's unwillingness that such mere essays should be displayed as specimens of the art of the F. U. E. E. When the twenty pounds which she advanced should have been laid out in blocks, ink, and paper, there was little doubt that the illustrations of the journal would be a triumphant instance of female energy well directed.

Meantime she repaired to Ermine Williams to persuade her to write an article upon the two pictures, a paper in the lively style in which Rachel herself could not excel, pointing out the selfishness of wilfully sentimental illusions. She found Ermine alone, but her usual fate pursued her in the shape of, first, Lady Temple, then both Colonel and Captain Keith, and little Rose, who all came in before she had had time to do more than explain her intentions. Rose had had another fright, and again the Colonel had been vainly trying to distinguish the bugbear of her fancy, and she was clinging all

the more closely to him because he was the only person of her acquaintance who did not treat her alarms as absolutely imaginary.

Rachel held her ground, well pleased to have so many spectators of this triumphant specimen of the skill of her asylum, and Lady Temple gave much admiration, declaring that no one ought to wear lace again without being sure that no one was tortured in making it, and that when she ordered her new black lace shawl of Mrs. Kelland, it should be on condition that the poor girls were not kept so very hard at work.

“ You will think me looking for another Sepoy likeness,” said the Colonel, “ but I am sure I have met this young lady or her twin sister somewhere in my travels.”

“ It is a satire on conventional pictures,” said Rachel.

“ Now, I remember,” he continued. “ It was when I was laid up with my wound at a Dutch boer’s till I could get to Cape Town. My sole reading was one number of the ‘Illustrated News,’ and I made too good acquaintance with that lady’s head, to forget her easily.”

“ Of course,” said Rachel, “ it is a reminiscence of the painting there represented.

“ What was the date?” asked Alick Keith.

The Colonel was able to give it with some precision.

“ You are all against me,” said Rachel; “ I see you are perfectly determined that there shall be something wrong about every performance of the F. U. E. E.”

“ No, don’t say so,” began Fanny, with gentle argument, but Alick Keith put in with a smile, “ It is a satisfaction to Miss Curtis.”

“ Athanasius against the world,” she answered.

"Athanasius should take care that his own foot is firm, his position incontrovertible," said Ermine.

"Well!"

"Then," said Ermine, "will you allow these little pictures to be examined into?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"Look here," and the Colonel lifted on the table a scrap-book that Rose had been quietly opening on his knee, and which contained an etching of a child playing with a dog, much resembling the style of the drawing. "Who did that, my dear?" he asked.

"Mamma had it," was Rose's reply; "it was always in my old nursery scrap-book."

"Every one knows," said Rachel, "that a woodcut is often like an etching, and an etching like a woodcut. I do not know what you are driving at."

"The little dogs and all," muttered Alick, as Rachel glanced rather indignantly at Rose and her book so attentively examined by the Colonel.

"I know," repeated Rachel, "that there is a strong prejudice against Mr. Mauleverer, and that it is entertained by many whom I should have hoped to see above such weakness; but when I brought these tangible productions of his system, as evidences of his success, I did not expect to see them received with a covert distrust, which I own I do not understand. I perceive now why good works find so much difficulty in prospering."

"I believe," said Alick Keith, "that I am to have the honour of dining at the Homestead on Monday?"

"Yes. The Greys spend the day with us, and it is Emily's due to have a good sight of you."

“Then will you let me in the meantime take my own measures with regard to these designs. I will not hurt or injure them in any way ; they shall be deposited here in Miss Williams’s hands, and I promise you that if I have been able to satisfy myself as to the means of their production, Simon Skinflint shall become a subscriber to the F. U. E. E. Is it a bargain ?”

“I never made such a bargain,” said Rachel, puzzled.

“Is that a reason for not doing so ?”

“I don’t know what you mean to do. Not to molest that poor Mrs. Rawlins. I will not have that done.”

“Certainly not. All I ask of you is that these works of art should remain here with Miss Williams, as a safe neutral, and that you should meet me here on Monday, when I will undertake to convince myself.”

“Not me ?” cried Rachel.

“Who would make it part of his terms to convince a lady ?”

“You mean to say,” exclaimed Rachel, considerably nettled, “that as a woman, I am incapable of being rationally convinced !”

“The proverb does not only apply to women,” said Ermine, coming to her rescue ; but Rachel, stung by the arch smile and slight bow of Captain Keith, continued—“Let the proof be convincing, and I will meet it as candidly as it is the duty of all reasonable beings to do. Only let me first know what you mean to prove.”

“The terms are these then, are they not, Miss Williams ? I am to come on Monday, February the 5th, prepared to test whether these designs are what they profess to be, and Miss Curtis undertakes to be convinced by that proof, provided it

be one that should carry conviction to a clear, unbiassed mind. I undertake, on the other hand, that if the said proof should be effectual, a mythical personage called Simon Skinflint shall become a supporter of the Female Union for Englishwomen's Employment."

He spoke with his own peculiar slowness and gravity, and Rachel, uncertain whether he were making game of her or not, looked perplexed, half on the defence, half gratified. The others were greatly amused, and a great deal surprised at Alick's unwonted willingness to take trouble in the matter. After a few moment's deliberation, Rachel said, "Well, I consent, provided that my candour be met by equal candour on the other side, and you will promise that if this ordeal succeeds, you will lay aside all prejudice against Mauleverer."

A little demur as to the reasonableness of this stipulation followed, but the terms finally were established. Mr. and Mrs. Grey, old family friends, had long been engaged to spend the ensuing Monday at the Homestead. The elder daughter, an old intimate of Grace's, had married an Indian civil servant, whom Colonel Keith was invited to meet at luncheon, and Captain Keith at dinner, and Alick was further to sleep at Gowanbrae. Lady Temple, who was to have been of the party, was called away, much to her own regret, by an appointment with the dentist of St. Norbert's, who was very popular and proportionately despotic, in being only visible at his own times, after long appointment. She would therefore be obliged to miss Alick's ordeal, though as she said, when Rachel—finding it vain to try to outstay so many—had taken her leave, "I should much like to see how it will turn out. I do believe that there is some difference in the colour of the ink in the middle and at the edge, and if

those people are deceiving Rachel, who knows what they may be doing to the poor children!"

It was exactly what every one was thinking, but it seemed to have fresh force when it struck the milder and slower imagination, and Lady Temple, seeing that her observation told upon those around her, became more impressed with its weight.

"It really is dreadful to have sent those little girls there without any one knowing what anybody does to them," she repeated.

"It makes even Alick come out in a new character," said the Colonel, turning round on him.

"Why," returned Alick, "my sister had so much to do with letting the young lady in for the scrape, that it is just as well to try to get her out of it. In fact, I think we have all sat with our hands before us in a shamefully cool manner, till we are all accountable for the humbuggery."

"When it comes to your reproaching us with coolness, Captain Keith, the matter becomes serious," returned Colin.

"It does become serious," was the answer; "it is hard that a person without any natural adviser should have been allowed to run headlong, by force of her own best qualities, into the hands of a sharper. I do not see how a man of any proper feeling, can stand by without doing something to prevent the predicament from becoming any worse."

"If you can," said Colonel Keith.

"I verily believe," said Alick, turning round upon him, "that the worse it is for her, the more you enjoy it!"

"Quite true," said Ermine in her mischievous way; "it is a true case of man's detestation of clever women! Look here, Alick, we will not have him here at the great ordeal of

the woodcuts. You and I are much more candid and unprejudiced people, and shall manage her much better."

"I have no desire to be present," returned the Colonel ; "I have no satisfaction in seeing my friend Alick baffled. I shall see how they both appear at luncheon afterwards."

"How will that be ?" asked Fanny, anxiously.

"The lady will be sententious and glorious, and will recommend the F. U. E. E. more than ever, and Alick will cover the downfall of his crest by double-edged assents to all her propositions."

"You will not have that pleasure," said Alick. "I only go to dinner there."

"At any rate," said the Colonel, "supposing your test takes effect by some extraordinary chance, don't take any further steps without letting me know."

The inference was drawn that he expected great results, but he continued to laugh at Alick's expectations of producing any effect on the Clever Woman, and the debate of the woodcuts was adjourned to the Monday.

In good time, Rachel made her appearance in Miss Williams's little sitting-room. "I am ready to submit to any test that Captain Keith may require to confute himself," she said to Ermine ; "and I do so the more readily that with all his mocking language, there is a genuine candour and honesty beneath that would be quite worth convincing. I believe that if once persuaded of the injustice of his suspicions he would in the reaction become a fervent supporter of Mr. Mauleverer and of the institution ; and though I should prefer carrying on our work entirely through women, yet this interest would be so good a thing for him, that I should by no means reject his assistance."

Rachel had, however, long to wait. As she said, Captain Keith was one of those inborn loiterers who, made punctual by military duty, revenge themselves by double tardiness in the common affairs of life. Impatience had nearly made her revoke her good opinion of him, and augur that, knowing himself vanquished, he had left the field to her, when at last a sound of wheels was heard, a dog-cart stopped at the door, and Captain Keith entered with an enormous blue and gold volume under his arm.

“I am sorry to be so late,” he said, “but I have only now succeeded in procuring my ally.”

“An ally!”

“Yes, in this book. I had to make interest at the Avon-
cester Library, before I could take it away with me.” As he spoke he placed the book desk-fashion on a chair, and turned it so that Ermine might see it; and she perceived that it was a bound-up volume of the “Illustrated London News.” Two marks were in it, and he silently parted the leaves at the first.

It revealed the lace-making beauty in all her rural charms.

“I see,” said Rachel; “it is the same figure, but not the same shaped picture.”

Without another word, Alick Keith opened the pages at the lace-school; and here again the figures were identical, though the margin had been differently finished off.

“I perceive a great resemblance,” again said Rachel; “but none that is not fully explained by Mr. Mauleverer’s accurate resemblance and desire to satirize foolish sentiment.”

Alick Keith took up the woodcut. “I should say,” he observed, holding it up to the light, “that it was unusual to mount a proof engraving so elaborately on a card.”

"Oh, I see what your distrust is driving at ; you suspect the designs of being pasted on."

"There is such a test as water," suggested Alick.

"I should be ashamed to return the proof to its master, bearing traces of unjust suspicion."

"If the suspicion you impute to me be unjust, the water will produce no effect at all."

"And you engage to retract all your distrust and contempt, if you are convinced that this engraving is genuine ?"

"I do," he answered steadily.

With irritated magnanimity Rachel dipped her finger into the vase of flowers on the table, and let a heavy drop of water fall upon the cottage scene. The centre remained unaltered, and she looked round in exultation, saying, "There, now I suppose I may wipe it off."

Neither spoke, and she applied her pocket handkerchief.

What came peeling away under her pressure ? It was the soft paper, and as she was passing the edge of the figure of the girl, she found a large smear following her finger. The peculiar brown of Indian ink was seen upon her handkerchief, and when she took it up a narrow hem of white had become apparent between the girl's head and its surroundings. Neither spectator spoke, they scarcely looked at her, when she took another drop from the vase, and using it more boldly found the pasted figure curling up and rending under her hand, lines of newspaper type becoming apparent, and the dark cloud spreading around.

"What does it mean ?" was her first exclamation ; then suddenly turning on Ermine, "Well, do you triumph ?"

"I am very, very sorry," said Ermine.

"I do not know that it is come to that yet," said Rachel,

trying to collect herself. "I may have been pressing too hard for results." Then looking at the mangled picture again as they wisely left her to herself, "But it is a deception! A deception! Oh! he need not have done it! Or," with a lightened look and tone of relief, "suppose he did it to see whether I should find it out?"

"He is hardly on terms with you for that," said Ermine; while Alick could not refrain from saying, "Then he would be a more insolent scoundrel than he has shown himself yet."

"I know he is not quite a gentleman," said Rachel, "and nothing else gives the instinct of the becoming. You have conquered, Captain Keith, if it be any pleasure to you to have given my trust and hope a cruel shock."

"With little satisfaction to myself," he began to say; but she continued, "A shock, a shock I say, no more; I do not know what conclusion I ought to draw. I do not expect you to believe in this person till he has cleared up the deceit. If it be only a joke in bad taste, he deserves the distrust that is the penalty for it. If you have been opening my eyes to a deception, perhaps I shall thank you for it some day. I must think it over."

She rose, gathered her papers together, and took her leave gravely, while Alick, much to Ermine's satisfaction, showed no elation in his victory. All he said was, "There is a great deal of dignity in the strict justice of a mind slow to condemn, or to withdraw the trust once given."

"There is," said Ermine, much pleased with his whole part in the affair; "there has been full and real candour, not flying into the other extreme. I am afraid she has a great deal to suffer."

"It was very wrong to have stood so still when the rascal began his machinations," repeated Alick, "Bessie absolutely helping it on! But for her, the fellow would have had no chance even of acquaintance with her."

"Your sister hardly deserves blame for that."

"Not exactly blame; but the responsibility remains," he replied gravely, and indeed he was altogether much graver than his wont, entirely free from irony, and evidently too sorry for Rachel, and feeling himself, through his sister, too guilty of her entanglement, to have any of that amused satisfaction that even Colin evidently felt in her discomfiture. In fact Ermine did not fully enter into Colin's present tactics; she saw that he was more than usually excited and interested about the F. U. E. E., but he had not explained his views to her, and she could only attribute his desire, to defer the investigation, to a wish that Mr. Mitchell should have time to return from London, whither he had gone to conclude his arrangements with Mr. Touchett, leaving the duty in commission between three delicate winter visitors.

Rachel walked home in a kind of dreamy bewilderment. The first stone in her castle had been loosened, and her heart was beginning to fail her, though the tenacity of her will produced a certain incapacity of believing that she had been absolutely deceived. Her whole fabric was so compact, and had been so much solidified by her own intensity of purpose, that any hollowness of foundation was utterly beyond present credence. She was ready to be affronted with Mauleverer for perilling all for a bad joke, but wildly impossible as this explanation would have seemed to others, she preferred taking refuge in it to accepting the full brunt of the blow upon her cherished hopes.

She had just re-entered the house on her return, when Grace met her, saying, "Oh, Rachel dear, Mrs. Rossitur is here."

"I think old servants have a peculiar propensity for turning up when the house is in a state of turmoil," returned Rachel.

"I have been walking round the garden with her, and doing my best to suffice for her entertainment," said Grace, good-naturedly, "but she really wants to see you on business. She has a bill for the F. U. E. E. which she wants you to pay."

"A bill for the F. U. E. E.?"

"Yes; she makes many apologies for troubling you, but Tom is to be apprenticed to a grocer, and they want this fifteen pounds to make up the fee."

"But I tell you, Grace, there can't have been fifteen pounds' worth of things had in this month, and they were paid on the 1st."

"She says they have never been paid at all since the 1st of December."

"I assure you, Grace, it is in the books. I made a point of having all the accounts brought to me on the 1st of every month, and giving out the money. I gave out 3*l.* 10*s.* for the Rossiturs last Friday, the 1st of February, when Mr. Mauleverer was over here. He said coals were dearer, and they had to keep more fires."

"There must be some mistake," said Grace.

"I'll show you the books. Mr. Mauleverer keeps one himself, and leaves one with me. Oh, botheration, there's the Grey carriage! Well, you go and receive them, and I'll try to pacify Mrs. Rossitur, and then come down."

Neatly kept were these account books of the F. U. E. E., and sure enough for every month were entered the sums for coals, wood, and potatoes, tallying exactly with Mrs. Rossitur's account, and each month Mr. Mauleverer's signature attested the receipt of the sum paid over to him by Rachel for household expenses. Rachel carried them down to Mrs. Rossitur, but this evidence utterly failed to convince that worthy personage that she had ever received a farthing after the 1st of December. She was profuse in her apologies for troubling Miss Rachel, and had only been led to do so by the exigencies of her son's apprentice fee, and she reposed full confidence in Rachel's eager assurance that she should not be a loser, and that in another day the matter should be investigated.

"And, Miss Rachel," added the old servant, "you'll excuse me, but they do say very odd things of the matron at that place, and I doubt you are deceived in her. Our lads went to the *the-a-ter* the other night, and I checked them well for it ; but mother, says they, we had more call to be there than the governess up to Miss Rachel's schule in Nichol Street, dressed out in pink feathers."

"Well, Mrs. Rossitur, I will make every inquiry, and I do not think you will find anything wrong. There must be some one about very like Mrs. Rawlins. I have heard of those pink feathers before, but I know who the matron is, and all about her ! Good-bye. I'll see you again before you go ; I suppose it won't be till the seven o'clock train."

Mrs. Rossitur remained expressing her opinion to the butler that dear Miss Rachel was too innocent, and then proceeded to lose all past cares in a happy return to "melting day," in the regions of her past glories as cook and housekeeper.

Rachel repaired to her room to cool her glowing cheeks, and repeat to herself, "A mistake, an error. It must be a blunder! That boy that went to the theatre may have cheated them! Mrs. Rawlins may have deceived Mr. Mauleverer. Anything must be true rather than——No, no! such a tissue of deception is impossible in a man of such sentiments! Persecuted as he has been, shall appearances make me—me, his only friend—turn against him? Oh, me? here come the whole posse purring upstairs to take off their things! I shall be invaded in a moment."

And in came Grace and the two younger ladies, and Rachel was no more her own from that moment.

CHAPTER IV.

THE FORLORN HOPE.

“ She whipped two female ’prentices to death,
And hid them in the coal-hole. For her mind
Shaped strictest plans of discipline, sage schemes,
Such as Lycurgus taught.”—*Canning and Frere.*

THE favourite dentist of the neighbourhood dwelt in a grand mansion at St. Norbert’s, and thither were conducted Conrade and Francis, as victims to the symmetry of their mouths. Their mother accompanied them to supply the element of tenderness, Alison that of firmness ; and, in fact, Lady Temple was in a state of much greater trepidation than either of her sons, who had been promised five shillings each as the reward of fortitude, and did nothing but discuss what they should buy with it.

They escaped with a reprieve to Conrade, and the loss of one tooth of Francis’s, and when the rewards had been laid out, and presents chosen for all the stay-at-home children, including Rose, Lady Temple became able to think about other matters. The whole party were in a little den at the pastrycook’s ; the boys consuming mutton pies, and the ladies ox-tail soup, while waiting to be taken up by the waggonette which had of late been added to the Myrtlewood establishment, when the little lady thus spoke—

"If you don't object, Miss Williams, we will go to Rachel's asylum on our way home."

Miss Williams asked if she had made the appointment.

"No," said Lady Temple, "but you see I can't be satisfied about those woodcuts ; and that poor woman, Mrs. Kelland, came to me yesterday about my lace shawl, and she is sadly distressed about the little girl. She was not allowed to see her, you know, and she heard such odd things about the place that I told her that I did not wonder she was in trouble, and that I would try to bring the child home, or at any rate see and talk to her."

"I hope we may be able to see her, but you know Colone Keith could not get in without making an appointment."

"I pay for her," said Lady Temple, "and I cannot bear its going on in this way without some one seeing about it. The Colonel was quite sure those woodcuts were mere fabrications to deceive Rachel ; and there must be something very wrong about those people."

"Did she know that you were going ?"

"No ; I did not see her before we went. I do not think she will mind it much ; and I promised." Lady Temple faltered a little, but gathered courage the next moment. "And indeed, after what Mrs. Kelland said, I could not sleep while I thought I had been the means of putting any poor child into such hands."

"Yes," said Alison, "it is very shocking to leave them there without inquiry, and it is an excellent thing to make the attempt."

And so the order was given to drive to the asylum, Alison marvelling at the courage which prompted this most unexpected assault upon the fortress that had repulsed two such

warriors as Colonel Keith and Mrs. Kelland. But timid and tender as she might be, it was not for nothing that Fanny Temple had been a vice-queen, so much accustomed to be welcomed wherever she penetrated, that the notion of a rebuff never suggested itself.

Coombe rang, and his lady made him let herself and Miss Williams out, so that she was on the step when the rough charwoman opened the door, and made the usual reply that Mr. Mauleverer was not within. Lady Temple answered that it was Mrs. Rawlins, the matron, that she wished to see, and with more audacity than Alison thought her capable of, inserted herself within the doorway, so as to prevent herself from being shut out as the girl took her message. The next moment the girl came back saying, "This way, ma'am, opened the door of a small dreary, dusty, cold parlour, where she shut them in, and disappeared before a word could be said.

There they remained so long, that in spite of such encouragement as could be derived from peeping over the blinds at Coombe standing sentinel over his two young masters at the carriage window, Lady Temple began to feel some dismay, though no repentance, and with anxious iteration conjured Miss Williams to guess what could be the cause of delay.

"Making ready for our reception," was Alison's answer in various forms; and Lady Temple repeated by turns, "I do not like it," and "it is very unsatisfactory. No, I don't like it at all," the *at all* always growing more emphatic.

The climax was, "Things must be very sad, or they would never take so much preparation. I'll tell you, Miss Williams," she added in a low confidential tone; "there are two of us, and the woman cannot be in two places at once. Now,

if you go up and see the rooms and all, which I saw long ago, I could stay and talk to the poor children."

Alison was the more surprised at the simple statecraft of the General's widow, but it was prompted by the pitiful heart yearning over the mysterious wrongs of the poor little ones.

At last Mrs. Rawlins sailed in, crape, streamers, and all, with the lowest of curtsies and fullest of apologies for having detained her Ladyship, but she had been sending out in pursuit of Mr. Mauleverer, he would be so disappointed ! Lady Temple begged to see the children, and especially Lovedy, whom she said she should like to take home for a holiday.

"Why, my lady, you see Mr. Mauleverer is very particular. I hardly know that I could answer it to him to have one of his little darlings out of his sight. It unsettles a child so to be going home, and Lovedy has a bad cold, my lady, and I am afraid it will run through the house. My little Alice is beginning of it."

However, Lady Temple kept to her desire of seeing Lovedy, and of letting her companion see the rest of the establishment, and they were at last ushered into the room already known to the visitors of the F. U. E. E., where the two children sat as usual in white pinafores, but it struck the ladies that all looked ill, and Lovedy was wrapped in a shawl, and sat cowering in a dull, stupified way, unlike the bright responsive manner for which she had been noted even in her lace-school days. Mary Morris gazed for a moment at Alison with a wistful appealing glance ; then, with a start as of fright, put on a sullen stolid look, and kept her eyes on her book. The little Alice, looking very heavy and feverish, leant against her, and Mrs. Rawlins went on talking of the colds,

the cruel she had made, and her care for her pupils' ailments, and Lady Temple listened so graciously that Alison feared she was succumbing to the palaver ; and by way of reminder, asked to see the dormitory.

“Oh, yes, ma’am, certainly, though we are rather in confusion,” and she tried to make both ladies precede her, but Lady Temple, for once assuming the uncomprehending nonchalance of a fine lady, seated herself languidly and motioned Alison on. The matron was evidently perplexed, she looked daggers at the children, for Ailie fancied so, but she was forced to follow the governess. Lady Temple breathed more freely, and rose. “My poor child,” she said to Lovedy, “you seem very poorly. Have you any message to your aunt ?”

“Please, please !” began Lovedy, with a hoarse sob.

“Lovedy, don’t, don’t be a bad girl, or you know——” interposed the little one, in a warning whisper.

“She is not naughty,” said Lady Temple gently, “only not well.”

“Please, my lady, look,” eagerly, though with a fugitive action of terror, Lovedy cried, unpinning the thin coarse shawl on her neck, and revealing the terrible stripes and weals of recent beating, such as nearly sickened Lady Temple.

“Oh, Lovedy,” entreated Alice, “she’ll take the big stick.”

“She could not do her work,” interposed Mary with furtive eagerness, “she is so poorly, and Missus said she would have the twenty sprigs if she sat up all night.”

“Sprigs !”

“Yes, ma’am, we makes lace more than ever we did to home, day and night ; and if we don’t she takes the stick.”

“Oh, Mary,” implored the child, “she said if you said one word.”

“Mary,” said Lady Temple, trembling all over, “where are your bonnets?”

“We haven’t none, ma’am,” returned Mary, “she pawned them. But, oh, ma’am, please take us away. We are used dreadful bad, and no one knows it.”

Lady Temple took Lovedy in one hand, and Mary in the other; then looked at the other little girl, who stood as petrified. She handed the pair to the astonished Coomb^b, bidding him put them into the carriage, and let Master Temple go outside, and then faced about to defend the rear, her rustling black silk and velvet filling up the passage, just as Alison and the matron were coming down stairs. “Mrs. Rawlins,” she said, in her gentle dignity, “I think Lovedy is so poorly that she ought to go home to her aunt to be nursed, and I have taken little Mary that she may not be left behind alone. Please to tell Mr. Mauleverer that I take it all upon myself. The other little girl is not at all to blame, and I hope you will take care of her, for she looks very ill.”

So much for being a Governor’s widow! A woman of thrice Fanny’s energy and capacity would not have effected her purpose so simply, and made the virago in the matron so entirely quail. She swept forth with such a consciousness of power and ease that few could have had assurance enough to gainsay her, but no sooner was she in the carriage than she seized Mary’s hand, exclaiming, “My poor, poor little dear! Francis, dear boy, the wicked people have been beating her! Oh, Miss Williams, look at her poor neck!”

Alison lifting Lovedy on her knee, glanced under the shawl, and saw indeed a sad spectacle, and she felt such a

sharpness of bone as proved that there was far from being the proper amount of clothing or of flesh to protect them. Lady Temple looked at Mary's attenuated hand, and fairly sobbed, "Oh, you have been cruelly treated!"

"Please don't let her get us," cried the frightened Mary.

"Never, never, my dear. We are taking you home to your mother."

Mary Morris was the spokeswoman, and volunteered the exhibition of bruises rather older, but no less severe than those of her companion. All had been inflicted by the woman ; Mr. Mauleverer had seldom or never been seen by the children, except Alice, who used often to be called into Mrs. Rawlins's parlour when he was there to be played with and petted. A charwoman was occasionally called in, but otherwise the entire work of the house was exacted from the two girls, and they had been besides kept perpetually to their lace pillows, and severely beaten if they failed in the required amount of work ; the ample wardrobe with which their patronesses had provided them had been gradually taken from them ; and their fare had latterly become exceedingly coarse, and very scanty. It was a sad story, and this last clause evoked from Francis's pocket a large currant bun, which Mary devoured with a famished appetite, but Lovedy held her portion untasted in her hand, and presently gave it to Mary, saying that her throat was so bad that she could not make use of anything. She had already been wrapped in Lady Temple's cloak, and Francis was desired to watch for a chemist's shop that something might be done for her relief, but the region of shops was already left behind, and even the villas were becoming scantier, so that nothing was to be done but to drive on, obtaining from time to time further

doeful narratives from Mary, and perceiving more and more how ill and suffering was the other poor child.

Moreover, Lady Temple's mind became extremely uneasy as to the manner in which Rachel might accept her exploit. All her valour departed as she figured to herself that young lady discrediting the alarm, and resenting her interference. She did not repent, she knew she could not have helped it, and she had rather have been tortured by Rachel than have left the victims another hour to the F. U. E. E., but she was full of nervous anxiety, little as she yet guessed at the full price of her courage ; and she uttered more than once the fervent wish that the Colonel had been there, for he would have known what to do. And Alison each time replied, "I wish it with all my heart !"

Wrought up at last to the pitch of nervousness that must rush on the crisis at once, and take the bull by the horns, this valiant piece of cowardice declared that she could not even return the girls to their homes till Rachel knew all about it, and gave the word to drive to the Homestead, further cheered by the recollection that Colonel Keith would probably be there, having been asked to luncheon, as he could not dine out, to meet Mr. Grey. Moreover, Mr. Grey was a magistrate and would know what was to be done.

Thus the whole party at the Homestead were assembled near the door, when, discerning them too late to avoid them, Lady Temple's equipage drew up in the peculiarly ungraceful fashion of waggonettes, when they prepare to shoot their passengers out behind.

Conrade, the only person who had the advantage of a previous view, stood up on the box, and before making his descent, shouted out, "Oh, Aunt Rachel, your F. U.

thing is as bad as the Sepoys. But we have saved the two little girls that they were whipping to death, and have got them in the carriage."

While this announcement was being delivered, Alison Williams, the nearest to the door, had emerged. She lifted out the little muffled figure of Lovedy, set her on her feet, and then looking neither to the right nor left, as if she saw and thought of no one else, made but one bound towards Colonel Keith, clasped both hands round his arm, turned him away from the rest, and with her black brows drawn close together, gasped under her breath, "O, Colin, Colin, it is Maria Hatherton."

"What ! the matron ?"

"Yes, the woman that has used these poor children like a savage. O, Colin, it is frightful."

"You should sit down, you are almost ready to faint."

"Nothing ! nothing ! But the poor girls are in such a state. And that Maria whom we taught, and——" Alison stopped.

"Did she know you ?"

"I can't tell. Perhaps ; but I did not know her till the last moment."

"I have long believed that the man that Rose recognised was Mauleverer, but I thought the uncertainty would be bad for Ermine. What is all this ?"

"You will hear. There ! Listen, I can't tell you ; Lady Temple did it all," said Alison, trying to draw away her arm from him, and to assume the staid governess. But he felt her trembling, and did not release her from his support as they turned back to the astonished group, to which, while these few words were passing, Francis, the little bareheaded white

aproned Mary Morris, and lastly Lady Temple, had by this time been added ; and Fanny, with quick but courteous acknowledgment of all, was singling out her cousin.

“ Oh, Rachel, dear, I did not mean it to have been so sudden or before them all, but indeed I could not help it,” she said in her gentle, imploring voice ; “ if you only saw that poor dear child’s neck.”

Rachel had little choice what she should say or do. What Fanny was saying tenderly and privately, the two boys were communicating open-mouthed, and Mrs. Curtis came at once with her nervous, “ What is it, my dear ; is it something very sad ? Those poor children look very cold, and half starved.”

“ Indeed,” said Fanny, “ they have been starved, and beaten, and cruelly used. I am very sorry, Rachel, but indeed that was a dreadful woman, and I thought Colonel Keith and Mr. Grey would tell us what ought to be done.”

“ Mr. Grey !” and Mrs. Curtis turned round eagerly, with the comfort of having some one to support her, “ will you tell us what is to be done ? Here has poor dear Rachel been taken in by this wicked scheme, and these poor——”

“ Mother, mother,” muttered Rachel, lashed up to desperation ; “ please not out here, before the servants and every one.”

This appeal and Grace’s opening of the door had the effect of directing every one into the hall, Mr. Grey asking Mrs. Curtis by the way, “ Eh ? Then this is Rachel’s new female asylum, is it ?”

“ Yes, I always feared there was something odd about it. I never liked that man, and now—— Fanny, my love, what is the matter ?”

In a few simple words Fanny answered that she had con-

trived to be left alone with the children, and had then found signs of such shocking ill-treatment of them, that she had thought it right to bring them away at once."

"And you will commit those wretches. You will send them to prison at once, Mr. Grey. They have been deceiving my poor Rachel ever so long, and getting sums upon sums of money out of her," said Mrs. Curtis, becoming quite blood-thirsty.

"If there is sufficient occasion I will summon the persons concerned to the Bench on Wednesday," said Mr. Grey, a practical, active squire.

"Not till Wednesday!" said Mrs. Curtis, as if she thought the course of justice very tardy. But the remembrance of Mr. Curtis's magisterial days came to her aid, and she continued, "but you can take all the examinations here at once, you know; and Grace can find you a summons paper, if you will just go into the study."

"It might save the having the children over to-morrow, certainly," said Mr. Grey, and he was inducted almost passively into the leathern chair before the library table, where Mr. Curtis had been wont to administer justice, and Grace was diving deep into a bureau for the printed forms long treasured there, her mother directing her, though Mr. Grey vainly protested that any foolscap would do as well. It was a curious scene. Mrs. Grey with her daughters had the discretion to remove themselves; but every one else was in a state of excitement, and pressed into the room, the two boys disputing under their breath whether the civilians called it a court martial, and, with some confusion between mutineers and Englishwomen, hoping the woman would be blown from the mouth of a cannon, for hadn't she gone and worn a cap

like mamma's? They would have referred the question to Miss Williams, but she had been deposited by the Colonel on one of the chairs in the furthest corner of the room, and he stood sheltering her agitation and watching the proceedings. Lady Temple still held a hand of each of her rescued victims, as if she feared they were still in danger, and all the time Rachel stood and looked like a statue, unable to collect her convictions in the hubbub, and the trust, that would have enabled her to defy all this, swept away from her by the morning's transactions. Yet still there was a hope that appearances might be delusive, and an habitual low estimate of Mr. Grey's powers that made her set on looking with her own eyes, not with his.

His first question was about the children's names and their friends, and this led to the despatching of a message to the mother and aunt. He then inquired about the terms on which they had been placed at St. Norbert's, and Rachel, who was obliged to reply, felt under his clear, stringent questions, keeping close to the point, a good deal more respect for his powers than she had hitherto entertained. That dry way of his was rather overwhelming. When it came to the children themselves, Rachel watched, not without a hope that the clear masculine intellect would detect Fanny in a mere frightened woman's fancy, and bring the F. U. E. E. off with flying colours.

Little Mary Morris stood forth valiant and excited. She was eleven years old, and intelligent enough to make it evident that she knew what she was about. The replies were full. The blows were described, with terrible detail of the occasions and implements. Still Rachel remembered the accusation of Mary's truth. She tried to doubt.

"I saw her with a bruised eye," said the Colonel's unexpected voice in a pause. "How was that?"

"Please, sir, Mrs. Rawlins hit me with her fist because I had only done seven sprigs. She knocked me down, and I did not come to for ever so long."

And not only this, and the like sad narratives, but each child bore the marks in corroboration of the words, which were more reluctant and more hoarse from Lovedy, but even more effective. Rachel doubted no more after the piteous sight of those scarred shoulders, and the pinched feeble face ; but one thing was plain, namely, that Mr. Mauleverer had no share in the cruelties. Even such severities as had been perpetrated while he was in the house, had, Mary thought, been protested against by him ; but she had seldom seen him ; he paid all his visits in the little parlour, and took no notice of the children except to prepare the tableau for public inspection. Mr. Grey, looking at his notes, said that there was full evidence to justify issuing a summons against the woman for assaulting the children, and proceeded to ask her name. Then while there was a question whether her christian name was known, the Colonel again said, "I believe her name to be Maria Hatherton. Miss Williams has recognised her as a servant who once lived in her family, and who came from her father's parish at Beauchamp."

Alison on inquiry corroborated the statement, and the charge was made against Maria Rawlins, *alias* Hatherton. The depositions were read over to the children, and signed by them ; with very trembling fingers by poor little Lovedy, and Mr. Grey said he would send a policeman with the summons early next day.

"But, Mr. Grey," burst out Mrs. Curtis, "you don't mean

that you are not going to do anything to that man ! Why he has been worse than the woman ! It was he that entrapped the poor children, and my poor Rachel here, with his stories of magazines and illustrations, and I don't know what all !”

“ Very true, Mrs. Curtis,” said the magistrate, “ but where's the charge against him ?”

It may be conceived how pleasant it was to the clever woman of the family to hear her mother declaiming on the arts by which she had been duped by this adventurer, appealing continually to Grace and Fanny, and sometimes to herself, and all before Mr. Grey, on whose old-world prejudices she had bestowed much more antagonism than he had thought it worth while to bestow on her new lights. Yet, at the moment, this operation of being written down an ass, was less acutely painful to her than the perception that was simultaneously growing on her of the miserable condition of poor little Lovedy, whose burning hand she held, and whose gasping breath she heard, as the child rested feebly in the chair in which she had been placed. Rachel had nothing vindictive or selfish in her mood, and her longing was, above all, to get away, and minister to the poor child's present sufferings ; but she found herself hemmed in, and pinned down by the investigation pushed on by her mother, involving answers and explanations that she alone could make.

Mr. Grey rubbed his forehead, and looked freshly annoyed at each revelation of the state of things. It had not been Mauleverer, but Rachel, who had asked subscriptions for the education of the children, he had but acted as her servant ; the counterfeit of the woodcuts, which Lady Temple suggested, could not be construed into an offence ; and it looked very

much as if, thanks to his cleverness, and Rachel's incaution, there was really no case to be made out against him, as if the fox had carried off the bait without even leaving his brush behind him. Sooth to say, the failure was a relief to Rachel ; she had thrown so much of her will and entire self into the upholding him, that she could not yet detach herself or sympathize with those gentle souls, the mother and Fanny, in keenly hunting him down. Might he not have been as much deceived in Mrs. Rawlins as herself ? At any rate she hoped for time to face the subject, and kneeling on the ground so as to support little Lovedy's sinking head on her shoulder, made the briefest replies in her power when referred to. At last, Grace recollected the morning's affair of Mrs. Rossitur's bills. Mr. Grey looked as if he saw daylight, Grace volunteered to fetch both the account-book and Mrs. Rossitur, and Rachel found the statement being extracted from her of the monthly production of the bills, with the entries in the book, and of her having given the money for their payment. Mr. Grey began to write, and she perceived that he was taking down her deposition. She beckoned Mary to support her poor little companion, and rising to her feet, said, to the horror and consternation of her mother, "Mr. Grey, pray let me speak to you !"

He rose at once, and followed her to the hall, where he looked prepared to be kind but firm.

"Must this be done to-day ?" she said.

"Why not ?" he answered.

"I want time to think about it. The woman has acted like a fiend, and I have not a word to say for her ; but I cannot feel that it is fair, after such long and entire trust of this man, to turn on him suddenly without notice."

“ Do you mean that you will not prosecute ? ” said Mr. Grey, with a dozen notes of interjection in his voice.

“ I have not said so. I want time to make up my mind, and to hear what he has to say for himself.”

“ You will hear that at the Bench on Wednesday.”

“ It will not be the same thing.”

“ I should hope not ! ”

“ You see,” said Rachel, perplexed and grievously wanting time to rally her forces, “ I cannot but feel that I have trusted too easily, and perhaps been to blame myself for my implicit confidence, and after that it revolts me to throw the whole blame on another.”

“ If you have been a simpleton, does that make him an honest man ? ” said Mr. Grey, impatiently.

“ No,” said Rachel, “ but——”

“ What ? ”

“ My credulity may have caused his dishonesty,” she said, bringing, at last, the words to serve the idea.

“ Look you here, Rachel,” said Mr. Grey, constraining himself to argue patiently with his old friend’s daughter ; “ it does not simply lie between you and him—a silly girl who has let herself be taken in by a sharper. That would be no more than giving a sixpence to a fellow that tells me he lost his arm at Sebastopol when he has got it sewn up in a bag. But you have been getting subscriptions from all the world, making yourself answerable to them for having these children educated, and then, for want of proper superintendence, or the merest rational precaution, leaving them to this barbarous usage. I don’t want to be hard upon you, but you are accountable for all this ; you have made yourself so ; and unless you wish to be regarded as a sharer in the iniquity,

the least you can do by way of compensation, is not to make yourself an obstruction to the course of justice."

"I don't much care how I am regarded," said Rachel, with subdued tone and sunken head; "I only want to do right, and not act spitefully and vindictively before he has had warning to defend himself."

"Or to set off to delude as many equal foo—mistaken people as he can find elsewhere? Eh, Rachel? Don't you see, if this *friend* of yours be innocent, a summons will not hurt him, it will only give him the opportunity of clearing himself."

"Yes, I see," owned Rachel, and overpowered, though far from satisfied, she allowed herself to be brought back, and did what was required of her, to the intense relief of her mother. During her three minutes' conference no one in the study had ventured on speaking or stirring, and Mrs. Curtis would not thank her biographer for recording the wild alarms that careered through her brain, as to the object of her daughter's tête-à-tête with the magistrate.

It was over at last, and the hall of justice broke up. Mary Morris was at once in her mother's arms, and in a few minutes more making up for all past privations by a substantial meal in the kitchen. But Mrs. Kelland had gone to Avonchester to

se thread, and only her daughter Susan had come up, the girl who was supposed to be a sort of spider, with no capacities beyond her web. Nor did Rachel think Lovedy capable of walking down to Mackarel Lane, nor well enough for the comfortless chairs and the third part of a bed. No, Mr. Grey's words that Rachel was accountable for the children's sufferings had gone to her heart. Pity was there and indignation, but these had brought such an anguish of

self-accusation as she could only appease by lavishing personal care upon the chief sufferer. She carried the child to her own sitting-room and made a couch for her before the fire, sending Susan away with the assurance that Lovedy should stay at the Homestead, and be nursed and fed till she was well and strong again. Fanny, who had accompanied her, thought the child very ill, and was urgent that the doctor should be sent for ; but between Rachel and the faculty of Avonmouth there was a deadly feud, and the proposal was scouted. Hunger and a bad cold were easily treated, and maybe there was a spark of consolation in having a patient all to herself and her homœopathic book.

So Fanny and her two boys walked down the hill together in the dark. Colonel Keith and Alison Williams had already taken the same road, anxiously discussing the future. Alison asked why Colin had not given Mauleverer's alias. "I had no proof," he said. "You were sure of the woman, but so far it is only guess work with him ; though each time Rose spoke of seeing Maddox coincided with one of Mauleverer's visits. Besides, Alison, on the back of that etching in Rose's book is written, 'Mrs. Williams, from her humble and obliged servant, R. Maddox.'"

"And you said nothing about it?"

"No, I wished to make myself secure, and to see my way before speaking out."

"What shall you do ? Can you trust to Rose's identifying him ?"

"I shall ride in to-morrow to see what is going on, and judge if it will be well to let her see this man, if he have not gone off, as I should fear was only too likely. Poor little Lady Temple, her exploit has precipitated matters."

“ And you will let every one, Dr. Long and all, know what a wretch they have believed. And then——”

“ Stay, Alison, I am afraid they will not take Maddox’s subsequent guilt as a proof of Edward’s innocence.”

“ It is a proof that his stories were not worth credit.”

“ To you and me it is, who do not need such proof. It is possible that among his papers something may be found that may implicate him and clear Edward, but we can only hold off and watch. And I greatly fear both man and woman will have slipped through our fingers, especially if she knew you.”

“ Poor Maria, who could have thought of such frightful barbarity ?” sighed Alison. “ I knew she was a passionate girl, but this is worse than one can bear to believe.”

She ceased, for she had been inexpressibly shocked, and her heart still yearned towards every Beauchamp school child.

“ I suppose we must tell Ermine,” she added ; “ indeed, I know I could not help it.”

“ Nor I,” he said, smiling, “ though there is only too much fear that nothing will come of it but disappointment. At least, she will tell us how to meet that.”

CHAPTER V.

THE BREWST SHE BREWED.

“Unwisely, not ignobly, have I given.”

Timon of Athens.

UNDER the circumstances of the Curtis family, no greater penance could have been devised than the solemn dinner party which had to take place only an hour after the investigation was closed. Grace in especial was nearly distracted between her desire to calm her mother and to comfort her sister, and the necessity of attending to the Grey family, who repaid themselves for their absence from the scene of action by a torrent of condolences and questions, whence poor Grace gathered to her horror and consternation that the neighbourhood already believed that a tenderer sentiment than philanthropy had begun to mingle in Rachel's relations with the secretary of the F.U.E.E. Feeling it incumbent on the whole family to be as lively and indifferent as possible, Grace, having shut her friends into their rooms to perform their toilette, hurried to her sister, to find her so entirely engrossed with her patient as absolutely to have forgotten the dinner party. No wonder! She had had to hunt up a housemaid to make up a bed for Lovedy in a little room within her own, and the undressing and bathing of the poor child had revealed injuries even in a more painful state than those which had been shown to Mr. Grey, shocking emacia-

tion, and most scanty garments. The child was almost torpid, and spoke very little. She was most unwilling to attempt to swallow ; however, Rachel thought that some of her globules had gone down, and put much faith in them, and in warmth and sleep ; but incessantly occupied, and absolutely sickened by the sight of the child's hurts, she looked up with loathing at Grace's entreaty that she would dress for the dinner.

“ Impossible,” she said.

“ You must, Rachel dear ; indeed, you must.”

“ As if I could leave *her*.”

“ Nay, Rachel, but if you would only send——”

“ Nonsense, Grace ; if I can stay with her I can restore her far better than could an allopathist, who would not leave nature to herself. O Grace, why can't you leave me in peace ? Is it not bad enough without this ? ”

“ Dear Rachel, I am very sorry ; but if you did not come down to dinner, think of the talk it would make.”

“ Let them talk.”

“ Ah, Rachel, but the mother ! Think how dreadful the day's work has been to her ; and how can she ever get through the evening if she is in a fright at your not coming down ? ”

“ Dinner parties are one of the most barbarous institutions of past stupidity,” said Rachel, and Grace was reassured. She hovered over Rachel while Rachel hovered over the sick child, and between her own exertions and those of two maids, had put her sister into an evening dress by the time the first carriage arrived. She then rushed to her own room, made her own toilette, and returned to find Rachel in conference with Mrs. Kelland, who had come home at last, and

was to sit with her niece during the dinner. Perhaps it was as well for all parties that this first interview was cut very short, but Rachel's burning cheeks did not promise much for the impression of ease and indifference she was to make, as Grace's whispered reminders of "the mother's" distress dragged her down stairs among the all too curious glances of the assembled party.

All had been bustle. Not one moment for recollection had yet been Rachel's. Mr. Grey's words, "Accountable for all," throbbed in her ears and echoed in her brain—the purple bruises, the red stripes, verging upon sores, were before her eyes, and the lights, the flowers, the people and their greetings, were like a dizzy mist. The space before dinner was happily but brief, and then, as last lady, she came in as a supernumerary on the other arm of Grace's cavalier, and taking the only vacant chair, found herself between a squire and Captain Keith, who had duly been bestowed on Emily Grey.

Here there was a moment's interval of quiet, for the squire was slightly deaf, and, moreover, regarded her as a little pert girl, not to be encouraged, while Captain Keith was resigned to the implied homage of the adorer of his cross; so that, though the buzz of talk and the clatter of knives and forks roared louder than it had ever seemed to do since she had been a child, listening from the outside, the immediate sense of hurry and confusion, and the impossibility of seeing or hearing anything plainly, began to diminish. She could not think, but she began to wonder whether any one knew what had happened; and, above all, she perfectly dreaded the quiet sting of her neighbour's word and eye, in this consummation of his victory. If he glanced at her, she knew she could not bear it; and if he never spoke to her at all,

it would be marked reprobation, which would be far better than sarcasm. He was evidently conscious of her presence ; for when, in her insatiable thirst, she had drained her own supply of water, she found the little bottle quietly exchanged for that before him. It was far on in the dinner before Emily's attention was claimed by the gentleman on her other hand, and then there was a space of silence before Captain Keith almost made Rachel start, by saying—

“This has come about far more painfully than could have been expected.”

“I thought you would have triumphed,” she said.

“No, indeed. I feel accountable for the introduction that my sister brought upon you.”

“It was no fault of hers,” said Rachel, sadly.

“I wish I could feel it so.”

“That was a mere chance. The rest was my own doing.”

“Aided and abetted by more than one looker-on.”

“No. It is I who am accountable,” she said, repeating Mr. Grey's words.

“You accept the whole?”

It was his usual, cool, dry tone ; but as she replied, “I must,” she involuntarily looked up, with a glance of entreaty to be spared, and she met those dark, grey, heavy-lidded eyes fixed on her with so much concern as almost to unnerve her.

“You cannot,” he answered ; “every bystander must rue the apathy that let you be so cruelly deceived, for want of exertion on their part.”

“Nay,” she said ; “you tried to open my eyes. I think this would have come worse, but for this morning's stroke.”

“Thank you,” he said, earnestly.

"I daresay you know more than I have been able to understand," she presently added ; "it is like being in the middle of an explosion, without knowing what stands or falls."

"And lobster-salad as an aggravation!" said he, as the dish successively persecuted them. "This dinner is hard on you."

"Very ; but my mother would have been unhappy if I had stayed away. It is the leaving the poor child that grieves me. She is in a fearful state, between sore throat, starvation, and blows."

The picture of the effect of the blows coming before Rachel at that moment, perilled her ability even to sit through the dinner ; but her companion saw the sudden whitening of her cheek, and by a dexterous signal at once caused her glass to be filled. Habit was framing her lips to say something about never drinking wine ; but somehow she felt a certain compulsion in his look, and her compliance restored her. She returned to the subject, saying, "But it was only the woman that was cruel."

"She had not her Sepoy face for nothing."

"Did I hear that Miss Williams knew her ?"

"Yes ; it seems she was a maid who had once been very cruel to little Rose Williams. The Colonel seems to think the discovery may have important consequences. I hardly know how."

This conversation sent Rachel out of the dining-room more like herself than she had entered it ; but she ran upstairs at once to Lovedy, and remained with her till disinterred by the desperate Grace, who could not see three people talking together without blushing with indignation at the construc-

tion they were certainly putting on her sister's scarlet cheeks and absence from the drawing-room. With all Grace's efforts, however, she could not bring her truant back before the gentlemen had come in. Captain Keith had seen their entrance, and soon came up to Rachel.

“How is your patient?” he asked.

“She is very ill; and the worst of it is, that it seems such agony to her to attempt to swallow.”

“Have you had advice for her?”

“No; I have often treated colds, and I thought this a case, aggravated by that wicked treatment.”

“Have you looked into her mouth?”

“Yes; the skin is frightfully brown and dry.”

He leant towards her, and asked, in an under tone—

“Did you ever see diphtheria?”

“No!”—her brow contracting—“did you?”

“Yes; we had it through all the children of the regiment at Woolwich.”

“You think this is it?”

He asked a few more questions, and his impression was evidently confirmed.

“I must send for Mr. Frampton,” said Rachel, homœopathy succumbing to her terror; but then, with a despairing glance, she beheld all the male part of the establishment handing tea.

“Where does he live? I'll send him up.”

“Thank you, oh! thank you. The house with the rails, under the east cliff.”

He was gone, and Rachel endured the reeling of the lights, and the surges of talk, and the musical performances that seemed to burst the drum of her ear; and, after all, people

went away, saying to each other that there was something very much amiss, and that poor dear Mrs. Curtis was very much to blame for not having controlled her daughters.

They departed at last, and Grace, without uttering the terrible word, was explaining to the worn-out mother that little Lovedy was more unwell, and that Captain Keith had kindly offered to fetch the doctor, when the Captain himself returned.

“I am sorry to say that Mr. Frampton is out, not likely to be at home till morning, and his partner is with a bad accident at Avonford. The best plan will be for me to ride back to Avonchester, and send out Macvicar, our doctor. He is a kind-hearted man, of much experience in this kind of thing.”

“But you are not going back,” said polite Mrs. Curtis, far from taking in the urgency of the case. “You were to sleep at Colonel Keith’s. I could not think of your taking the trouble.”

“I have settled that with the Colonel, thank you. My dog-cart will be here directly.”

“I can only say, thank you,” said Rachel, earnestly. “But is there nothing to be done in the meantime? Do you know the treatment?”

He knew enough to give a few directions, which revealed to poor Mrs. Curtis the character of the disease.

“That horrible new sore throat! Oh, Rachel, and you have been hanging over her all this time!”

“Indeed,” said Alick Keith, coming to her. “I think you need not be alarmed. The complaint seems to me to depend on the air and locality. I have been often with people who had it.”

“And not caught it?”

“No ; though one poor little fellow, our piper’s son, would not try to take food from any one else, and died at last on my knee. I do not believe it is infectious in that way.”

And hearing his carriage at the door, he shook hands, and hurried off, Mrs. Curtis observing—

“He really is a very good young man. But oh, Rachel, my dear, how could you bring her here ?”

“I did not know, mother. Any way it is better than her being in Mrs. Kelland’s hive of children.”

“You are not going back to her, Rachel, I entreat !”

“Mother, I must. You heard what Captain Keith said. Let that comfort you. It would be brutal cruelty and cowardice to stay away from her to-night. Good night, Grace, make mother see that it must be so.”

She went, for poor Mrs. Curtis could not withstand her ; and only turned with tearful eyes to her elder daughter to say, “You do not go into the room again Grace, I insist.”

Grace could not bear to leave Rachel to the misery of such a vigil, and greatly reproached herself for the hurry that had prevented her from paying any heed to the condition of the child in her anxiety to make her sister presentable ; but Mrs. Curtis was in a state of agitation that demanded all the care and tenderness of this “mother’s child,” and the sharing her room and bed made it impossible to elude the watchfulness that nervously guarded the remaining daughter.

It was eleven o’clock when Alexander Keith drove from the door. It was a moonlight night, and he was sure to spare no speed, but he could hardly be at Avonchester within an hour and a half, and the doctor would take at least two in coming out. Mrs. Kelland was the companion of Rachel’s

watch. The woman was a good deal subdued. The strangeness of the great house tamed her, and she was shocked and frightened by the little girl's state as well as by the young lady's grave, awe-struck, and silent manner.

They tried all that Captain Keith had suggested, but the child was too weak and spent to inhale the steam of vinegar, and the attempts to make her swallow produced fruitless anguish. They could not discover how long it was since she had taken any nourishment, and they already knew what a miserable pittance hers had been at the best. Mrs. Kelland gave her up at once, and protested that she was following her mother, and that there was death in her face. Rachel made an imperious gesture of silence, and was obeyed so far as voice went, but long-drawn sighs and shakes of the head continued to impress on her the aunt's hopelessness, throughout the endeavours to change the position, the moistening of the lips, the attempts at relief in answer to the choked effort to cough, the weary, faint moan, the increasing faintness and exhaustion.

One o'clock struck, and Mrs. Kelland said, in a low, ominous voice, "It is the turn of the night, Miss Rachel. You had best leave her to me."

"I will never leave her," said Rachel impatiently.

"You are a young lady, Miss Rachel, you ain't used to the like of this."

"Hark!" Rachel held up her finger.

Wheels were crashing up the hill. The horrible responsibility was over, the immediate terror gone, help seemed to be coming at the utmost need, and tears of relief rushed into Rachel's eyes, tears that Lovedy must have perceived, for she spoke the first articulate words she had uttered since the night-

watch had begun, “Please, ma’am, don’t fret, I’m going to poor mother.”

“You will be better now, Lovedy, here is the doctor,” said Rachel, though conscious that this was not the right thing, and then she hastened out on the stairs to meet the gaunt old Scotsman and bring him in. He made Mrs. Kelland raise the child, examined her mouth, felt her feet and hands, which were fast becoming chill, and desired the warm flannels still to be applied to them.

“Cannot her throat be operated on ?” said Rachel, a tremor within her heart. “I think we could both be depended on if you wanted us.”

“She is too far gone, poor lassie,” was the answer, “it would be mere cruelty to torment her. You had better go and lie down, Miss Curtis ; her mother and I can do all she is like to need.”

“Is she dying ?”

“I doubt if she can last an hour longer. The disease is in an advanced state, and she was in too reduced a state to have battled with it, even had it been met earlier.”

“As it should have been ! Twice her destroyer !” sighed Rachel, with a bursting heart, and again the kind doctor would have persuaded her to leave the room, but she turned from him and came back to Lovedy, who had been roused by what had been passing, and had been murmuring something which had set her aunt off into sobs.

“She’s saying she’ve been a bad girl to me, poor lamb, and I tell her not to think of it ! She knows it was for her good, if she had not been set against her work.”

Dr. Macvicar authoritatively hushed the woman, but Lovedy looked up with flushed cheeks, and the blue eyes

that had been so often noticed for their beauty. The last flush of fever had come to finish the work.

“Don’t fret,” she said, “there’s no one to beat me up there! Please, the verse about the tears.”

Dr. Macvicar and the child both looked towards Rachel, but her whole memory seemed scared away, and it was the old Scotch army surgeon that repeated—

“‘The Lord God shall wipe off tears from all eyes.’ Ah! poor little one, you are going from a world that has been full of woe to you.”

“Oh, forgive me, forgive me, my poor child,” said Rachel, kneeling by her, the tears streaming down silently.

“Please, ma’am, don’t cry,” said the little girl feebly; “you were very good to me. Please tell me of my Saviour,” she added to Rachel. It sounded like set phraseology, and she knew not how to begin; but Dr. Macvicar’s answer made the lightened look come back, and the child was again heard to whisper—“Ah! I knew they scourged Him—for me.”

This was the last they did hear, except the sobbing breaths, ever more convulsive. Rachel had never before been present with death, and awe and dismay seemed to paralyse her whole frame. Even the words of hope and prayer for which the child’s eyes craved from both her fellow-watchers seemed to her a strange tongue, inefficient to reach the misery of this untimely mortal agony, this work of neglect and cruelty—and she the cause.

Three o’clock had struck before the last painful gasp had been drawn, and Mrs. Kelland’s sobbing cry broke forth. Dr. Macvicar told Rachel that the child was at rest. She shivered from head to foot, her teeth chattered, and she murmured, “Accountable for all.”

Dr. Macvicar at once made her swallow some of the cordial brought for the poor child, and then summoning the maid whom Grace had stationed in the outer room, he desired her to put her young mistress to bed without loss of time. The sole remaining desire of which she was conscious was to be alone and in the dark, and she passively submitted.

CHAPTER VI.

THE SARACEN'S HEAD.

“ Alas, he thought, how changed that mien,
How changed those timid looks have been,
Since years of guilt and of disguise
Have steeled her brow and armed her eyes.”

Marmion.

“ ARE you sleepy, Rose ? What a yawn !”

“ Not sleepy, Aunt Ailie ; only it is such a tiresome long day when the Colonel does not come in.”

“ Take care, Rosie ; I don’t know what we shall be good for at this rate.”

“ We ? O Aunt Ermine, then you think it tiresome too. I know you do ——”

“ What’s that, Rose ?”

“ It is ! it is ! I’ll open the door for him.”

The next moment Rose led her Colonel in triumph into the lamp-light. There was a bright light in his eye, and yet he looked pale, grave, and worn ; and Ermine’s first observation was—

“ How came Tibbie to let you out at this time of night ?”

“ I have not ventured to encounter Tibbie at all. I drove up to your door.”

“ You have been at St. Norbert’s all this time,” exclaimed Alison.

“ Do you think no one can carry on a campaign at St.

Norbert's but yourself and your generalissima, Miss Ailie?" he said, stroking down Rose's brown hair.

"Then, if you have not gone home, you have had nothing to eat, and that is the reason you look so tired," said Ermine.

"Yes; I had some luncheon at the Abbey."

"Then, at any rate, you shall have some tea. Rosie, run and fetch the little kettle."

"And *the* Beauchamp cup and saucer," added Rose, proudly producing the single relic of a well-remembered set of olden times. "And please, please, Aunt Ermine, let me sit up to make it for him. I have not seen him all day, you know; and it is the first time he ever drank tea in our house, except make-believe with Violetta and Colinette."

"No, Rose. Your aunt says I spoil that child, and I am going to have my revenge upon you. You must see the wild beast at his meals another time; for it just happens that I have a good deal to say to your aunts, and it is not intended for your ears."

Rose showed no signs of being spoilt, for she only entreated to be allowed "just to put the tea-things in order," and then, winking very hard, she said she would go.

"Here, Rose, if you please," said Ermine, clearing the space of table before her.

"Why, Aunt Ermine, I did not know you could make tea!"

"There are such things as extraordinary occasions, Rose. Now, good night, my sweet one."

"Good night, my Lady Discretion. We will make up for it one of these days. Don't stay away, pray, Ailie," as Alison was following the child. "I have nothing to say till you come back."

"I know it is good news," said Ermine ; "but it has cost you something, Colin."

Instead of answering, he received his cup from her, filled up her tea-pot, and said—

"How long is it since you poured out tea for me, Ermine?"

"Thirteen years next June, when you and Harry used to come in from the cricket field, so late and hot that you were ashamed to present yourself in civilized society at the Great House."

"As if nobody from the Parsonage ever came down to look on at the cricket."

"Yes ; being summoned by all the boys to see that nothing would teach a Scotchman cricket."

"Ah ! you have got the last word, for here comes Ailie."

"Of course," said Alison, coming in ; "Ermine has had the pith of the story, so I had better ask at once what it is."

"That the Beauchamp Eleven beat Her Majesty's —th Foot on Midsummer Day, 1846, is the pith of what I have as yet heard," said Ermine.

"And that Beauchamp ladies are every whit as full of mischief as they used to be in those days, is the sum of what I have told," added Colin.

"Yes," said Ermine, "he has most loyally kept his word of reserving all for you. He has not even said whether Mauleverer is taken."

"My story is grave and sad enough," said Colin, laying aside all his playfulness, and a serious expression coming over his features ; but, at the same time, the landlady's sandy cat, which, like all other animals, was very fond of him, and had established herself on his knee as soon as Rose had left it

vacant, was receiving a certain firm, hard, caressing stroking, which resulted in vehement purrs on her part, and was evidently an outlet of suppressed exultation.

“ Is he the same ? ” asked Alison.

“ All in due time ; unless, like Miss Rachel, you wish to tell me my story yourselves. By-the-bye, how is that poor girl to-day ? ”

“ Thoroughly knocked down. There is a sort of feverish lassitude about her that makes them very anxious. They were hoping to persuade her to see Mr. Frampton when Lady Temple heard last.”

“ Poor thing ! it has been a sad affair for her. Well, I told you I should go over this morning and see Mr. Grey, and judge if anything could be done. I got to the Abbey at about eleven o'clock, and found the policeman had just come back after serving the summons, with the news that Mauleverer was gone.”

“ Gone ! ”

“ Clean gone ! Absconded from his lodgings, and left no traces behind him. But, as to the poor woman, the policeman reported that she had been left in terrible distress, with the child extremely ill, and not a penny, not a thing to eat in the house. He came back to ask Mr. Grey what was to be done ; and as the suspicion of diphtheria made every one inclined to fight shy of the house, I thought I had better go down and see what was to be done. I knocked a good while in vain ; but at last she looked out of window, and I told her I only wanted to know what could be done for her child, and would send a doctor. Then she told me how to open the door. Poor thing ! I found her the picture of desolation, in the midst of the dreary kitchen, with the child gasping

on her lap ; all the pretence of widowhood gone, and her hair hanging loose about her face, which was quite white with hunger, and her great eyes looked wild, like the glare of a wild beast's in a den. I spoke to her by her own name, and she started and trembled, and said, 'Did Miss Alison tell you ?' I said, 'Yes,' and explained who I was, and she caught me up half way : 'O yes, yes, my lady's nephew, that was engaged to Miss Ermine !' And she looked me full and searchingly in the face, Ermine, when I answered 'Yes.' Then she almost sobbed, 'And you are true to her ?' and put her hands over her face in an agony. It was a very strange examination on one's constancy, and I put an end to it by asking if she had any friends at home that I could write to for her ; but she cast that notion from her fiercely, and said she had no friend, no one. He had left her to her fate, because the child was too ill to be moved. And indeed the poor child was in such a state that there was no thinking of anything else, and I went at once to find a doctor and a nurse."

"Diphtheria again ?"

"Yes ; and she, poor thing, was in no state to give it the resolute care that is the only chance. Doctors could be easily found, but I was at my wit's end for a nurse, till I remembered that Mr. Mitchell had told me of a Sisterhood that have a Home at St. Norbert's, with a nursing establishment attached to it. So, in despair, I went there, and begged to see the Superior, and a most kind and sensible lady I found her, ready to do anything helpful. She lent me a nice little Sister, rather young, I thought ; but who turned out thoroughly efficient, nearly as good as a doctor. Still, whether the child lives is very doubtful, though the mother was full of hope

when I went in last. She insisted that I had saved it, when both she and it had been deserted by Maddox, for whom she had given up everything."

"Then she owned that he was Maddox?"

"She called him so, without my even putting the question to her. She had played his game long enough; and now his desertion has evidently put an end to all her regard for him. It was confusedly and shortly told; the child was in a state that prevented attention being given to anything else; but she knows that she had been made a tool of to ruin her master and you; and the sight of you, Ailie, had evidently stirred up much old affection, and remembrance of better days."

"Is she his wife?"

"No; or the evidence she promises could not be used against him. Do you know this, Ermine?" as he gave her a cover, with a seal upon it.

"The Saracen! the Saracen's head, Colin; it was made with the lost seal-ring!"

"The ring was taken from Edward's dressing-room the night when Rose was frightened with the phosphorus. Maria declares that she did not suspect the theft, or Maddox's purpose, till long after she had left her place. He effected his practices under pretence of attachment to her, and then could not shake her off. She went abroad with him after the settlement of affairs; but he could not keep out of gambling speculation, and lost everything. Then he seems to have larked about, obtaining means she knows not how—as artist, lecturer, and what not—till the notable F. U. E. E. was started. Most likely he would have collected the subscriptions and made off with them, if Rachel Curtis had not

had just sense enough to trust him with nothing without seeing some result ; so that he was forced to set the affair going with Maria at its head, as the only person who could co-operate with him. They kept themselves ready for a start whenever there should be symptoms of a discovery ; but, in the meantime, he gambled away all that he got into his hands, and never gave her enough to feed the children. Thus she was absolutely driven to force work from them for subsistence ; and she is a passionate creature, whom jealousy embittered more and more, so that she became more savage than she knew. Poor thing ! she has her punishment. Maddox only came home, yesterday, too late for any train before the mail, and by that time the child was too ill to be moved. He must have thought it all up with him, and wished to be rid of both, for they quarrelled, and he left her to her misery.”

“What, gone ?”

“Yes ; but she told us of his haunts—haunts that he thought she did not know—a fancy shop, kept by a Mrs. Dench at Bristol, where, it seems, that he plays the philanthropical lecturer ; and probably has been trying to secure a snug berth for himself unknown, as he thought, to Maria ; but she pried into his letters, and kept a keen watch upon him. He was to be inquired for there by his Mauleverer name, and, I have little doubt, will be captured.”

“And then ?”

“He will be committed for trial at the sessions ; and, in the meantime, I must see Beauchamp and Dr. Long, and arrange that he should be prosecuted for the forgery, even though he should slip through our fingers at the sessions.”

“Oh, could that be ?”

"This Clever Woman has managed matters so sweetly, that they might just as well try her as him for obtaining money on false pretences ; and the man seems to have been wonderfully sharp in avoiding committing himself. Mrs. Curtis's man of business has been trying all day to get up the case, but he has made out nothing but a few more debts such as that which turned up yesterday ; and it is very doubtful how far a case can be made out against him."

"And then we should lose him."

"That is exactly what I wish to avoid. I want to bring up my forces at once, and have him laid hold of at once for the forgery of those letters of Edward's. How long would it take to hear from Ekaterinburg ? I suppose Edward could travel as fast as a letter."

Alison fairly sprang to her feet.

"O, Colin, Colin ! you do not think that Edward would be here by the next sessions."

"He ought," said Colin. "I hope to induce Dr. Long and Harry to write him such letters as to bring him home at once."

Self-restrained Alison was fairly overcome. She stretched out both hands, pressed Colin's convulsively, then turned away her face, and, bursting into tears, ran out of the room.

"Poor dear Ailie," said Ermine ; "she has suffered terribly. Her heart is full of Edward. Oh, I hope he will come."

"He must. He cannot be so senseless as to stay away."

"There is that unfortunate promise to his wife ; and I fear that he is become so much estranged from English ways, that he will hardly care to set himself straight here, after the pain that the universal suspicion gave him."

"He cannot but care. For the sake of all he *must* care," vehemently repeated Colin, with the punctilious honour of the nobly-born soldier. "For his child's sake, this would be enough to bring him from his grave. If he refused to return to the investigation, it would be almost enough to make me doubt him."

"I am glad you said *almost*," said Ermine, trying to smile; but he had absolutely brought tears into her eyes.

"Dear Ermine," he said, gently, "you need not fear my not trusting him to the utmost. I know that he has been too much crushed to revive easily, and that it may not be easy to make him appreciate our hopes from such a distance; but I think such a summons as this must bring him."

"I hope it will," said Ermine. "Otherwise we should not deserve that you should have any more to do with us."

"Ermine, Ermine, do you not know that nothing can make any difference between us?"

Ermine had collected herself while he spoke.

"I know," she said, "that all you are doing makes me thank and bless you—oh! more than I can speak."

He looked wistfully at her; but, tearful as were her eyes, there was a resolution about her face that impressed upon him that she trusted to his promise of recurring no more within the year to the subject so near his heart; and he could say no more than, "You forgive me, Ermine; you know I trust him as you do."

"I look to your setting him above being only *trusted*," said Ermine, trying to smile. "Oh! if you knew what this ray of hope is in the dreary darkness that has lasted so long!"

Therewith he was obliged to leave her, and she only saw

him for a few minutes in the morning, when he hurried in to take leave, since, if matters went right at the magistrates' bench, he intended to proceed at once to make such representations in person to Mr. Beauchamp and Dr. Long, as might induce them to send an urgent recall to Edward in time for the spring sessions, and for this no time must be lost. Ermine remained then alone with Rose, feeling the day strangely long and lonely, and that, perhaps, its flatness might be a preparation for the extinction of all the brightness that had of late come into her life. Colin had said he would trust as she did, but those words had made her aware that she *must* trust as he did. If he, with his clear sense and kindly insight into Edward's character, became convinced that his absence proceeded from anything worse than the mere fainthearted indifference that would not wipe off a blot, then Ermine felt that his judgment would carry her own along with it, and that she should lose her undoubting faith in her brother's perfect innocence, and in that case her mind was made up ; Colin might say and do what he would, but she would never connect him through herself with deserved disgrace. The parting, after these months of intercourse and increased knowlege of one another, would be infinitely more wretched than the first ; but, cost her what it would—her life perhaps—the break should be made rather than let his untainted name be linked with one where dishonour justly rested. But with her constant principle of abstinence from dwelling on contingencies, she strove to turn away her mind, and to exert herself ; though this was no easy task, especially on so solitary a day as this, while Alison was in charge at Myrtlewood in Lady Temple's absence, and Rachel Curtis was reported far too ill to leave her room, so that Ermine saw

no one all day except her constant little companion ; nor was it till towards evening that Alison at length made her appearance, bringing a note which Colin had sent home by Lady Temple.

All had so far gone well. Maria Hatherton had been committed to take her trial at the quarter sessions for the assault upon the children ; but, as her own little girl was still living, though in extreme danger, and the Sisters promised to take charge of both for the present, Colonel Keith had thought it only common humanity to offer bail, and this had been accepted. Later in the day, Mauleverer himself had been brought down, having been taken up at a grand meeting of his Bristol friends, who had all rallied round him, expressing strong indignation at the accusation, and offering evidence as to character. He denied any knowledge of the name of Maddox, and declared that he was able to prove that his own account of himself as a popular, philanthropical lecturer was perfectly correct ; and he professed to be much amazed at the charges brought against him, which could only have arisen from some sudden alarm in the young lady's mind, excited by her friends, whom he had always observed to be prejudiced against him. He appealed strongly against the hardship of being imprisoned on so slight a charge ; but, as he could find no one to take his part, he reserved his defence for the quarter sessions, for which he was fully committed. Colin thought, however, that it was so doubtful whether the charges against him could be substantiated, that it was highly necessary to be fully prepared to press the former forgery against him, and had therefore decided upon sleeping at St. Norbert's and going on by an early train to obtain legal advice in London, and then to see Harry Beau-

champ. Meantime, Ermine must write to her brother as urgently as possible, backing up Colin's own representations of the necessity of his return.

Ermine read eagerly, but Alison seemed hardly able to command her attention to listen, and scarcely waited for the end of the letter before her own disclosure was made. Francis was sickening with diphtheria ; he had been left behind in the morning on account of some outbreak of peevishness, and Alison, soon becoming convinced that temper was not solely in fault, had kept him apart from his brothers, and at last had sent for the doctor, who had at once pronounced it to be the same deadly complaint which had already declared itself in Rachel Curtis. Alison had of course devoted herself to the little boy till his mother's return from St. Norbert's, when she had been obliged to give the first intimation of what the price of the loving little widow's exploit might be. "I don't think she realizes the extent of the illness," said Alison ; "say what I would, she would keep on thanking me breathlessly, and only wanting to escape to him. I asked if we should send to let Colin know, and she answered in her dear, unselfish way, 'By no means, it would be safer for him to be out of the way ;' and, besides, she knew how much depended on his going."

"She is right," said Ermine ; "I am thankful that he is out of reach of trying to take a share in the nursing ; it is bad enough to have *one* in the midst !"

"Yes," said Alison. "Lady Temple cannot be left to bear this grievous trouble alone, and when the Homestead cannot help her. Yet, Ermine, what can be done ? Is it safe for you and Rose ?"

"Certainly not safe that you should come backwards and

forwards," said Ermine. " Rose must not be put in danger ; so, dear, dear Ailie, you had better take your things up, and only look in on us now and then at the window."

Alison entirely broke down. " Oh, Ermine, Ermine, since you began to mend, not one night have we been apart ! "

" Silly child," said Ermine, straining her quivering voice to be cheerful, " I am strong, and Rose is my best little handmaid."

" I know it is right," said Alison ; " I could not keep from my boys, and, indeed, now Colin is gone, I do not think any one at Myrtlewood will have the heart to carry out the treatment. It will almost kill that dear young mother to see it. No, they cannot be left ; but oh, Ermine, it is like choosing between you and them."

" Not at all, it is choosing between right and wrong."

" And Ermine, if—if I should be ill, you must not think of coming near me. Rose must not be left alone."

" There is no use in talking of such things," said Ermine, resolutely ; " let us think of what must be thought of, not of what is in the only Wise Hands. What has been done about the other children ? "

" I have kept them away from the first ; I am afraid for none of them but Conrade."

" It would be the wisest way to send them, nurses and all, to Gowansbrae."

" Wise, but cool," said Alison.

" I will settle that," returned Ermine. " Tibbie shall come and invite them, and you must make Lady Temple consent."

The sisters durst not embrace, but gazed at one another, feeling that it might be their last look, their hearts swelling

with unspoken prayer, but their features so restrained that neither might unnerve the other. Then it was that Alison, for the first time, felt absolute relief in the knowledge, once so bitter, that she had ceased to be the whole world to her sister. And Ermine, for one moment, felt as if it would be a way out of all troubles and perplexities if the two sisters could die together, and leave little Rose to be moulded by Colin to be all he wished ; but she resolutely put aside the future, and roused herself to send a few words in pencil, requesting Tibbie to step in and speak to her.

That worthy personage had fully adopted her, and entering, tall and stately, in her evening black silk and white apron, began by professing her anxiety to be any assistance in her power, saying, “she'd be won'efu' proud to serve Miss Williams, while her sister was sae thrang waitin' on her young scholar in his sair trouble.”

Ermine thanked her, and rejoiced that the Colonel was out of harm's way.

“Deed, aye, ma'am, he's weel awa'. He has sic a wark wi' thae laddies an' their bit bairn o' a mither, I'll no say he'd been easy keepit out o' the thick o' the distress, an' it's may be no surprisin', after a' that's come and gane, that he seeks to take sicc an lift of the concern. I've mony a time heard tell that the auld General, Sir Stephen, was as good as a faither to him, when he was sick an' lonesome, puir lad, in yon far awa' land o' wild beasts an' savages.”

“Would it not be what he might like, to take in the children out of the way of infection ?”

“‘Deed, Miss Ermine,’ with a significant curtsey, “I'm thinkin' ye ken my maister Colin amaist as weel as I do. He's the true son of his forbears, an' Gowansbrae used to be

always open in the auld lord's time, that's his grandfather Foreby, that he owes so much kindness to the General."

Ermine further suggested that it was a pity to wait for a letter from the Colonel, and Tibbie quite agreed. She "liked the nurse as an extraordinar' douce woman, not like the fine English madams that Miss Isabel—that's Mrs. Comyn Menteith—put about her bairns ; and as to room, the sergeant and the tailor bodie did not need much, and the masons were only busy in the front parlour."

"Masons ?" asked Ermine.

"Ou, aye ? didna ye ken it's for the new room, that is to be built out frae the further parlour, and what they ca' the bay to the drawin'-room, just to mak' the house more conformable like wi' his name and forbears. I never thocht but that ye'd surely seen the plans and a', Miss Ermine ; an' if so be it was Maister Colin's pleasure the thing suld be private, I'm real vext to hae said a word ; but ye'll may be no let on to him, ma'am, that ye ken onything about it."

"Those down-stairs rooms so silently begun," thought Ermine. "How fixed his intention must be ? Oh, how will it end ? What would be best for him ? And how can I think of myself, while all, even my Ailie, are in distress and danger ?"

Ermine had, however, a good deal to think of ; for not only had she Colin's daily letter to answer, but she had Conrade, Leoline, and Hubert with her for several hours every day, and could not help being amused by Rose's ways with them, little grown-up lady as she was compared to them. Luckily girls were such uncommon beings with them as to be rather courted than despised ; and Rose, having nothing of the tom-boy, did not forfeit the privileges of her

sex. She did not think they compensated for her Colonel's absence, and never durst introduce Violetta to them ; but she enjoyed and profited by the contact with childhood, and was a very nice little comforter to Conrade when he was taken with a fit of anxiety for the brother whom he missed every moment.

Quarantine weighed, however, most heavily upon poor Grace Curtis. Rachel had from the first insisted that she should be kept out of her room ; and the mother's piteous entreaty always implied that saddest argument, "Why should I be deprived of you both in one day ?" So Grace found herself condemned to uselessness almost as complete as Ermine's. She could only answer notes, respond to inquiries, without even venturing far enough from the house to see Ermine, or take out the Temple children for a walk. For indeed Rachel's state was extremely critical.

The feverish misery that succeeded Lovedy's death had been utterly crushing, the one load of self-accusation had prostrated her, but with a restlessness of agony, that kept her writhing as it were in her wretchedness ; and then came the gradual increase of physical suffering, bearing in upon her that she had caught the fatal disorder. To her sense of justice, and her desire to wreak vengeance on herself, the notion might be grateful ; but the instinct of self-preservation was far stronger. She could not die. The world here, the world to come, were all too dark, too confused, to enable her to bear such a doom. She saw her peril in her mother's face ; in the reiterated visits of the medical man, whom she no longer spurned ; in the calling in of the Avonchester physician ; in the introduction of a professional nurse, and the strong and agonizing measures to which she had to submit,

every time with the sensation that the suffering could not possibly be greater without exceeding the powers of endurance.

Then arose the thought that with weakness she should lose all chance of expressing a wish, and, obtaining pencil and paper, she began to write a charge to her mother and sister to provide for Mary Morris ; but in the midst there came over her the remembrance of the papers that she had placed in Mauleverer's hands—the title-deeds of the Burnaby Bargain ; an estate that perhaps ought to be bringing in as much as half the rental of the property. It must be made good to the poor. If the title-deeds had been sold to any one who could claim the property, what would be the consequence ? She felt herself in a mist of ignorance and perplexity ; dreading the consequences, yet feeling as if her own removal might leave her fortune free to make up for them. She tried to scrawl an explanation ; but mind and fingers were alike unequal to the task, and she desisted just as fresh torture began at the doctor's hands—torture from which they sent her mother away, and that left her exhausted, and despairing of holding out through a repetition.

And then—and then ! “ Tell me of my Saviour,” the dying child had said ; and the drawn face had lightened at the words to which Rachel's oracles declared that people attached crude or arbitrary meanings ; and now she hardly knew what they conveyed to her, and longed, as for something far away, for the reality of those simple teachings—once realities, now all by rote ! Saved by faith ! What was faith ? Could all depend on a last sensation ? And as to her life. Failure, failure through headstrong blindness and self-will, resulting in the agony of the innocent. Was this

ground of hope? She tried to think of progress and purification beyond the grave; but this was the most speculative, insecure fabric of all. There was no habit of trust to it—no inward conviction, no outward testimony. And even when the extreme danger subsided, and Francis Temple was known to be better, Rachel found that her sorrow was not yet ended; for Conrade had been brought home with the symptoms of the complaint—Conrade, the most beloved and loving of Fanny's little ones, the only one who really remembered his father, was in exceeding, almost hopeless, peril, watched day and night by his mother and Miss Williams.

The little Alice, Maria Hatherton's own child, had lingered and struggled long, but all the care and kindness of the good Sisters at St. Norbert's had been unavailing, she had sunk at last, and the mother remained in a dull, silent tearless misery, quietly doing all that was required of her, but never speaking nor giving the ladies any opening to try to make an impression upon her.

Rachel gleaned more intelligence than her mother meant her to obtain, and brooded over it in her weakness and her silence.

Recovery is often more trying than illness, and Rachel suffered greatly. Indeed, she was not sure that she ought to have recovered at all, and perhaps the shock to her nerves and spirits was more serious than the effect of the sharp passing disorder, which had, however, so much weakened her that she succumbed entirely to the blow. “Accountable for all,” the words still rang in her ears, and the *all* for which she was accountable continually magnified itself. She had tied a dreadful knot, which Fanny, meek contemned Fanny had cut, but at the cost of grievous suffering and danger to her

boys, and too late to prevent that death which continually haunted Rachel; those looks of convulsive agony came before her in all her waking and sleeping intervals. Nothing put them aside, occupation in her weakness only bewildered and distracted her, and even though she was advancing daily towards convalescence, leaving her room, and being again restored to her sister, she still continued listless, dejected, cast down, and unable to turn her mind from this one dreary contemplation. Of Fanny and her sons it was hardly possible to think, and one of the strange perturbations of the mind in illness caused her to dwell far less on them than on the minor misery of the fate of the title-deeds of the Burnaby Bargain, which she had put into Mauleverer's hand. She fancied their falling into the hands of some speculator, who, if he did not break the mother's heart by putting up a gasometer, would certainly wring it by building hideous cottages, or desirable marine residences. The value would be enhanced so as to be equal to more than half that of the Homestead, the poor would have been cheated of it, and what compensation could be made? Give up all her own share? Nay, she had nothing absolutely her own while her mother lived, only 5,000*l.* was settled on her if she married, and she tortured herself with devising plans that she knew to be impracticable, of stripping herself, and going forth to suffer the poverty she merited. Yes, but how would she have lived. Not like the Williamses! She had tried teaching like the one, and writing like the other, but had failed in both. The Clever Woman had no marketable or available talent. She knew very well that nothing would induce her mother and sister to let her despoil herself, but to have injured them would be even more intolerable; and more

than all was the sickening uncertainty, whether any harm had been done, or what would be its extent.

Ignorant of such subjects at the best, her brain was devoid of force even to reason out her own conjectures, or to decide what must be impossible. She felt compelled to keep all to herself; to alarm her mother was out of the question, when Mrs. Curtis was distressed and shaken enough already, and to have told Grace would only have brought her soothing promises of sharing the burthen—exactly what she did not want—and would have led to the fact being known to the family man of business, Mr. Cox, the very last person to whom Rachel wished to confess the proceeding. It was not so much the humiliation of owning to him such a fatal act of piracy upon his province, as because she believed him to have been the cause that the poor had all this time been cheated of the full value of the estate. He had complacently consulted the welfare of the Curtis family, by charging them with the rent of the fields as ordinary grass land, and it had never dawned on him that it would be only just to increase the rent. Rachel had found him an antagonist to every scheme she had hatched, ever since she was fifteen years old; her mother obeyed him with implicit faith, and it was certain that if the question were once in his hands, he would regard it as his duty to save the Curtis funds, and let the charity sink or swim. And he was the only person out of the house whom Rachel had seen.

As soon as—or rather before—she could bear it, the first day that her presence was supposed not to be perilous to others, she was obliged to have an interview with him, to enable him to prepare the case for the quarter sessions. Nothing could be much worse for her nerves and spirits,

but even the mother was absolutely convinced of the necessity, and Rachel was forced to tax her enfeebled powers to enable her to give accurate details of her relations with Mauleverer, and enable him to judge of the form of the indictment. Once or twice she almost sunk back from the exceeding distastefulness of the task, but she found herself urged on, and when she even asked what would happen if she were not well enough to appear, she was gravely told that she *must* be—it would be very serious if she did not make a great effort, and even her mother shook her head, looked unhappy, but confirmed the admonition. A little revenge or hatred would have been a great help to her, but she could not feel them as impulses. If it had been the woman, she could have gladly aided in visiting such cruelty upon her, but this had not been directly chargeable upon Mauleverer ; and though Rachel felt acutely that he had bitterly abused her confidence, she drooped too much to feel the spirit of retort. The notion of being confronted with him before all the world at Avonchester, and being made to bring about his punishment, was simply dreadful to her, but when she murmured some word of this to her mother, Mrs. Curtis fairly started, and said quite fiercely, “ *My* dear, don’t let me hear you say any such thing. *He* is a very wicked man, and you ought to be glad to have him punished !”

She really spoke as if she had been rebuking some infringement of decorum, and Rachel was quite startled. She asked Grace why the mother was so bent on making her vindictive, but Grace only answered that every one must be very much shocked, and turned away the subject.

Prudent Grace ! Her whole soul was in a tumult of wrath and shame at what she knew to be the county gossip, but

she was aware that Rachel's total ignorance of it was the only chance of her so comporting herself in court as to silence the rumour, and she and her mother were resolutely discreet.

Mrs. Curtis, between nursing, anxiety, and worry, looked lamentably knocked up, and at last Grace and Rachel prevailed on her to take a drive, leaving Rachel on a sofa in her sitting-room, to what was no small luxury to her just at present—that of being miserable alone—without meeting any one's anxious eyes, or knowing that her listlessness was wounding the mother's heart. Yet the privilege only resulted in a fresh preturbation about the title-deeds, and longing to consult some one who could advise and sympathize. Ermine Williams would have understood and made her Colonel give help, but Ermine seemed as unattainable as Nova Zembla, and she only heard that the Colonel was absent. Her head was aching with the weary load of doubt, and she tried to cheat her woe by a restless movement to the windows. She saw Captain Keith riding to the door. It suddenly darted into her mind that here was one who could and would help her. He could see Mauleverer and ascertain what had become of the deeds ; he could guess at the amount of danger ! She could not forget his kindness on the night of Lovedy's illness, or the gentleness of his manner about the woodcuts, and with a sudden impulse she rang the bell and desired that Captain Keith might be shown in. She was still standing leaning on the table when he entered.

“This is very good in you,” he said ; “I met your mother and sister on my way up, and they asked me to leave word of Conrade being better, but they did not tell me I should see you.”

“Conrade is better ? ” said Rachel, sitting down, unable to stand longer.

“Yes, his throat is better. Miss Williams’s firmness saved him. They think him quite out of danger.”

“Thank Heaven ! Oh, I could never have seen his mother again ! Oh, she has been the heroine ! ”

“In the truest sense of the word,” he answered. And Rachel looked up with one moment’s brightening at the old allusion, but her oppression was too great for cheerfulness, and she answered—

“Dear Fanny, yes, she will be a rebuke to me for ever ! But,” she added, before he had time to inquire for her health, “I wanted—I wanted to beg you to do me a service. You were so kind the other night.”

His reply was to lean earnestly forward, awaiting her words, and she told him briefly of her grievous perplexity about the title-deeds.

“Then,” he said, “you would wish for me to see the man and ascertain how he has disposed of them.”

“I should be most grateful ! ”

“I will do my utmost. Perhaps I may not succeed immediately, as I believe visitors are not admitted every day, and he is said to be busy preparing his defence, but I will try, and let you know.”

“Thanks, thanks ! The doubt is terrible, for I know worry about it would distract my mother.”

“I do not imagine,” he said, “that much worse consequences than worry could ensue. But there are none more trying.”

“Oh not *none* ! ”

“Do not let worry about this increase other ills,” he said,

kindly ; “do not think about this again till you hear from me.”

“Is that possible ?”

“I should not have thought so, if I had not watched my uncle cast off troubles about his eye-sight and the keeping his living.”

“Ah ! but those were not of his own making.”

“‘There is a sparkle even in the darkest water.’ That was a saying of his,” said Alick, looking anxiously at her pale cheek and down-cast eye.

“Not when they are turbid.”

“They will clear,” he said, and smiled with a look of encouraging hope that again cheered her in spite of herself. “Meantime remember that in any way I can help you, it will be the greatest favour——” he checked himself as he observed the exceeding langour and lassitude apparent in her whole person, and only said, “My sister is too much at the bottom of it for me not to feel it the greatest kindness to me to let me try to be of the slightest use. I believe I had better go now,” as he rose and looked at her wistfully ; “you are too much tired to talk.”

“I believe I am,” she said, almost reluctantly ; “but thank you, this has done me good.”

“And you are really getting better ?”

“Yes, I believe so. Perhaps I may feel it when this terrible day is over.”

What a comfort it would be, she said to herself, when he was gone, if we had but a near relation like him, who would act for the mother, instead of our being delivered up, bound hand and foot, to Mr. Cox. It would have been refreshing to have kept him now, if I could have done it without

talking ; it really seemed to keep the horrible thoughts in abeyance, to hear that wonderfully gentle tone ! And how kind and soft the look was ! I do feel stronger for it ! Will it really be better after next week ? Alas ! that will have undone nothing.

Yet even this perception of a possibility of hope that there would be relief after the ordeal, was new to Rachel ; and it soon gave way to that trying feature of illness, the insurmountable dread of the mere physical fatigue. The Dean of Avonchester, a kind old friend of Mrs. Curtis, had insisted on the mother and daughters coming to sleep at the Deanery, on the Tuesday night, and remaining till the day after the trial ; but Rachel's imagination was not even as yet equal to the endurance of the long drive, far less of the formality of a visit. Lady Temple was likewise asked to the Deanery, but Conrade was still too ill for her to think of leaving him for more than the few needful hours of the trial ; nor had Alison been able to do more than pay an occasional visit at her sister's window to exchange reports, and so absorbed was she in her boys and their mother, that it was quite an effort of recollection to keep up to Ermine's accounts of Colonel Keith's doings.

It was on the Monday afternoon, the first time she had ventured into the room, taking advantage of Rose having condescended to go out with the Temple nursery establishment, when she found Ermine's transparent face all alive with expectation. "He may come any time now," she said ; "his coming to-day or to-morrow was to depend on his getting his business done on Saturday or not."

And in a few minutes' time the well-known knock was heard, and Ermine, with a look half arch half gay, surprised

her sister by rising with the aid of the arm of her chair, and adjusting a crutch that had been leaning against it.

“ Why Ermine ! you could not bear the jarring of that crutch——”

“ Five or six years ago, Ailie, when I was a much poorer creature ;” then as the door opened, “ I would make you a curtsey, Colonel Keith, but I am afraid I can’t quite do that,” though still she moved nearer to meet him, but perhaps there was a look of helplessness which made her exultation piteous, for he responded with an exclamation of alarm, put out his arm to support her, and did not relax a frown of anxiety till he had placed her safe in her chair again, while she laughed perhaps a little less freely, and said, “ See what it is to have had to shift for oneself !”

“ You met me with your eyes the first time, Ermine, and I never missed anything.”

“ Well, I think it is hard not to have been more congratulated on my great achievement ! I thought I should have had at least as much credit as Widdrington, my favourite hero and model.”

“ When you have an arm to support you it may be all very well, and I shall never stand it without.” Then, as Ermine subsided, unprepared with a reply, “ Well, Ailie, how are your boys ?”

“ Both much better, Francis nearly well.”

“ You have had a terrible time ! And their mother ?”

“ Dearer and sweeter than ever,” said Alison, with her voice trembling ; “ no one who has not seen her now can guess half what she is !”

“ I hope she has not missed me. If this matter had not been so pressing, I could not have stayed away.”

“ The one message she always gave me was, that you were not to think of coming home ; and, indeed, those dear boys were so good, that we managed very well without you.”

“ Yes, I had faith in your discipline, and I think that matters are in train against Edward comes. Of course there is no letter, or you would have told me.”

“ He will be coming himself,” said Ermine, resolved against again expressing a doubt ; while Alison added that he hated letter-writing.

“ Nothing could be more satisfactory than Beauchamp’s letter,” added Colin. “ He was so thoroughly convinced, that he immediately began to believe that he had trusted Edward all along, and had only been overruled.”

“ I dare say,” said Ermine, laughing ; “ I can quite fancy honest Harry completely persuaded that he was Edward’s champion, while Maddox was turning him round his finger.”

“ And such is his good faith, that I hope he will make Edward believe the same ! I told you of his sending his love to you, and of his hopes that you would some day come and see the old place. He made his wife quite cordial.”

Alison did not feel herself obliged to accept the message, and Ermine could freely say, “ Poor Harry ! I should like to see him again ! He would be exactly the same, I dare say. And how does the old place look ?”

“ Just what I do not want you to see. They have found out that the Rectory is unhealthy, and stuck up a new bald house on the top of the hill and the Hall is new furnished in colours that set one’s teeth on edge. Nothing

is like itself but Harry, and he only when you get him off duty—without his wife! I was glad to get away to Belfast."

"And there, judging from Julia's letter, they must have nearly devoured you."

"They were very hospitable. Your sister is not so very unlike you, Ermine?"

"Oh, Colin!" exclaimed Alison, with an indignation of which she became ashamed, and added, by way of making it better, "Perhaps not so very."

"She was very gracious to me," said Colin, smiling, "and we had much pleasant talk of you."

"Yes," said Ermine, "it will be a great pleasure to poor Julia to be allowed to take us up again, and you thought the doctor sufficiently convinced."

"More satisfactorily so than Harry, for he reasoned out the matter, and seems to me to have gone more by his impression that a man *could* not be so imprudent as Edward in good faith than by Maddox's representation."

"That is true," said Alison, "he held out till Edward refused to come home, and then nothing would make him listen to a word on his behalf."

"And it will be so again," thought Ermine, with a throb at her heart. Then she asked, "Did you see whether there was a letter for you at home?"

"Yes, I looked in, and found only this, which I have only glanced at, from Bessie."

"From Paris?"

"Yes, they come home immediately after Easter. 'Your brother is resolved I should be presented, and submit to the whole season in style; after which he says I may judge for

myself.' What people will do for pretty young wives ! Poor Mary's most brilliant season was a winter at Edinburgh ; And it must be his doing more than hers, for she goes on : ' Is it not very hard to be precluded all this time from playing the chieftainess in the halls of my forefathers ? I shall have to run down to your Gowansbrae to refresh myself, and see what you are all about, for I cannot get the fragment of a letter from Alick ; and I met an Avon-cestrian the other day, who told me that the whole county was in a state of excitement about the F. U. etc. ; that every one believed that the fascinating landscape-painter was on the high road to winning one of the joint-heiresses ; but that Lady Temple—the most incredible part of the story—had blown up the whole affair, made her way into the penetralia of the asylum, and rescued two female 'prentices, so nearly whipped to death that it took an infinitesimal quantity of Rachel's homœopathy to demolish one entirely, and that the virtuous public was highly indignant that there was no inquest nor trial for manslaughter ; but that it was certain that Rachel had been extremely ill ever since. Poor Rachel, there must be some grain of truth in all this ; but one would like to be able to contradict it. I wrote to ask Alick the rights of the story, but he has not vouchsafed me a line of reply ; and I should take it as very kind in you to let me know whether he is in the land of the living or gone to Edinburgh—as I hear is to be the lot of the Highlanders—or pining for the uncroquetable lawn, to which I always told him he had an eye.' "

"She may think herself lucky he has not answered," said Ermine ; "he has always been rather unreasonably angry with her for making the introduction."

"That is the reason he has not," added Alison, "for he is certainly not far off. He has been over almost every day to inquire, and played German tactics all Saturday afternoon with Francis to our great relief. But I have stayed away long enough."

"I will walk back with you, Ailie. I must see the good little heroine of the most incredible part of the story."

Lady Temple looked a good deal paler than when he had last seen her, and her eyelids still showed that they had long arrears of sleep to make up ; but she came down with outstretched hands and a sunny smile. "They are so much better, and I am so glad you were not at home in the worst of it."

"And I am sorry to have deserted you."

"Oh, no, no, it was much better that you should be away. We should all have wanted you, and that would have been dangerous ; and dear, dear Miss Williams did all that could be done. Do you know, it taught me that you were right when you told me I ought never to rest till the boys learnt to obey, for obedience' sake, at a word. It showed what a bad mother I am ; for I am sure if dear Conrade had been like what he was last year, even she could not have saved him," said Fanny, her eyes full of tears.

Then came her details, to which he listened, as ever, like the brotherly friend he was, and there was a good deal said about restoring the little ones, who were still at Gowanbrae, to which he would by no means as yet consent, though Fanny owned herself to have time now to pine for her Stephana, and to "hear how dismal it is to have a silent nursery."

“Yes, it has been a fearful time. We little guessed how much risk you ran when you went to the rescue.”

“Dear Con, when he thought—when we thought he could not get better, said I was not to mind that, and I don’t,” said Fanny. “I thought it was right; and though I did not know this would come of it, yet you see God has been very merciful, and brought both of my boys out of this dreadful illness, and I dare say it will do them good all their lives now it is over. I am sure it will to me, for I shall always be more thankful.”

“Everything does you good,” he said.

“And another thing,” she added, eagerly, “it has made me know that dear Miss Williams so much better. She was so good, so wonderfully good, to come away from her sister to us. I thought she was quite gone the first day, and that I was alone with my poor Francie, and presently there she was by my side, giving me strength and hope by her very look. I want to have her for good; I want to make her my sister! She would teach the boys still, for nobody else could make them good; but if ever her sister could spare her, she must never go away again.”

“You had better see what she says,” replied the Colonel, with suppressed emotion.

That night, when Conrade and Francis were both fast asleep, their mother and their governess sat over the fire together, languid but happy, and told out their hearts to one another—told out more than Alison had ever put into words even to Ermine, for her heart was softer and more unreserved now than ever it had been since her sister’s accident had crushed her youth. There was thenceforth a bond between her and Lady Temple that gave the young widow the strong-

hearted, sympathizing, sisterly friend she had looked for in Rachel, and that filled up those yearnings of the affection that had at first made Alison feel that Colin's return made the world dreary to her. Her life had a purpose, though that purpose was not Ermine! But where were Edward and his letter?

CHAPTER VII.

THE QUARTER SESSIONS.

“Is it so nominated in the bond ?”—*Merchant of Venice.*

MALGRE her disinclination, Rachel had reached the point of recovery in which the fresh air and change of scene of the drive to Avonchester could not fail to act as restoratives, and the first evening with the Dean and his gentle old sister was refreshing and comfortable to her spirits.

It was in the afternoon of the ensuing day that Mr. Grey came to tell her that her presence would soon be required, and both her mother and sister drove to the court with her. Poor Mrs. Curtis, too anxious to go away, yet too nervous to go into court, chose, in spite of all Mr. Grey’s advice, to remain in the carriage with the blinds closed, far too miserable for Grace to leave her.

Rachel, though very white, called up a heroic smile, and declared that she should get on very well. Her spirit had risen to the occasion, so as to brace her nerves to go becomingly through what was inevitable ; and she replied with a ready “yes,” to Mr. Grey’s repetition of the advice for ever dinned into her ears, not to say a word more than needful, feeling indeed little disposed to utter anything that she could avoid.

She emerged from the dark passage into full view of faces

which were far more familiar than she could have wished. She would have greatly preferred appearing before a judge, robed, wigged, and a stranger, to coming thus before a country gentleman, slightly known to herself, but an old friend of her father, and looking only like his ordinary self.

All the world indeed was curious to see the encounter between Rachel Curtis and her impostor, and every one who had contributed so much as a dozen stamps to the F. U. E. E. felt as if under a personal wrong and grievance, while many hoped to detect other elements of excitement, so that though *all* did not overtly stare at the witness, not even the most considerate could resist the impulse to glance at her reception of the bow with which he greeted her entrance.

She bent her head instinctively, but there was no change of colour on her cheek. Her faculties were concentrated, and her resolute will had closed all avenues to sensations that might impair her powers ; she would not give way either to shame and remorse for herself, or to pity or indignation against the prisoner ; she would attend only to the accuracy of the testimony that was required of her as an expiation of her credulous incaution ; but such was the tension of her nerves, that, impassive as she looked, she heard every cough, every rustle of paper ; each voice that addressed her seemed to cut her ears like a knife ; and the chair that was given to her after the administration of the oath was indeed much needed.

She was examined upon her arrangement that the prisoner should provide for the asylum at St. Norbert's, and on her monthly payment to him of the sums entered in the account-book. In some cases she knew he had shown her the bills unreceipted ; in others, he had simply made the charge in

the book, and she had given to him the amount that he estimated as requisite for the materials for wood-engraving. So far she felt satisfied that she was making herself distinctly understood ; but the prisoner, acting as his own counsel, now turned to her and asked the question she had expected and was prepared for, whether she could refer to any written agreement.

“No ; it was a *vivā voce* agreement.”

Could she mention what passed at the time of making the arrangement that she had stated as existing between himself and her ?

“I described my plans, and you consented.”

An answer at which some of the audience could have smiled, so well did it accord with her habits. The prisoner again insisted on her defining the mode of his becoming bound to the agreement. Rachel took time for consideration ; and Alison Williams, sitting between Lady Temple and Colonel Keith, felt dizzy with anxiety for the answer. It came at last.

“I do not remember the exact words ; but you acquiesced in the appearance of your name as secretary and treasurer.”

The prospectus was here brought forward, and Mauleverer asked her to define the duties he had been supposed to undertake in the character in which he had there figured. It of course came out that she had been her own treasurer, only entrusting the nominal one with the amount required for current expenses ; and again, in reply to his deferential questions, she was obliged to acknowledge that he had never in so many words declared the sums entered in the book to have been actually paid, and not merely estimates for monthly expenditure to be paid to the tradesmen at the usual seasons.

“I understood that they were paid,” said Rachel, with some resentment.

“Will you oblige me by mentioning on what that understanding was founded?” said the prisoner, blandly.

There was a pause. Rachel knew she must say something; but memory utterly failed to recall any definite assurance that these debts had been discharged. Time passed, all eyes were upon her, there was a dire necessity of reply; and though perfectly conscious of the weakness and folly of her utterance, she could only falter forth, “I thought so.” The being the Clever Woman of the family, only rendered her the more sensible both of the utter futility of her answer, and of the effect it must be producing.

Alison hung her head, and frowned in absolute shame and despair, already perceiving how matters must go, and feeling as if the hope of her brother’s vindication were slipping away—reft from her by Rachel’s folly. Colin gave an indignant sigh, and whispering to her, “Come out when Lady Temple does, I will meet you,” he made his way out of court.

There had been a moment’s pause after Rachel’s “I thought so,” and then the chairman spoke to the counsel for the prosecution. “Mr. Murray, can you carry the case any further by other witnesses? At present I see no case to go to the jury. You will see that the witness not only does not set up any case of embezzlement, but rather leads to an inference in the contrary direction.”

“No, sir,” was the answer; “I am afraid that I can add nothing to the case already presented to you.”

Upon this, the chairman said,

“Gentlemen of the Jury,—The case for the prosecution

does not sustain the indictment or require me to call on the prisoner for his defence, and it is your duty to find him not guilty. You will observe that we are not trying a civil action, in respect of the large sum which he has received from the young lady, and for which he is still accountable to her ; nor by acquitting him are you pronouneing that he has not shown himself a man of very questionable honesty, but only that the evidence will not bring him within the grasp of the criminal law, as guilty of embezzlement under the statute, and this because of the looseness of the arrangements, that had been implied instead of expressed. It is exceedingly to be regretted that with the best intentions and kindest purposes, want of caution and experience on her part should have enabled the prisoner thus to secure himself from the possibility of a conviction ; but there can be no doubt that the evidence before us is such as to leave no alternative but a verdict of not guilty."

The very tenderness and consideration of the grey-haired Sir Edward Morden's tone were more crushing to Rachel than severe animadversions on her folly would have been from a stranger. Here was she, the Clever Woman of the family, shown in open court to have been so egregious a dupe that the deceiver could not even be punished, but must go scot-free, leaving all her wrongs unredressed ! To her excited, morbid apprehension, magnified by past self-sufficiency, it was as though all eyes were looking in triumph at that object of general scorn and aversion, a woman who had stepped out of her place. She turned with a longing to rush into darkness and retirement when she was called to return to her mother ; and even had she still been present, little would she have recked that when the jury had, without

many moments' delay, returned a verdict of "Not Guilty," the prisoner received a strong, stern reprimand from Sir Edward, to whom he replied with a bow that had in it more of triumph than of acceptance.

Burning tears of disappointment were upon Alison's cheek, the old hopeless blank was returning, and her brother might come back in vain, to find his enemy beyond his reach. Here was an end alike of his restoration and of Ermine's happiness !

"Oh !" whispered Lady Temple, "is it not horrid ? Is nothing to be done to that dreadful man ? I always thought people came here to do justice. I shall never like Sir Edward Morden again ! But, oh ! what can that be ? Where is the Colonel ? "

It was a loud, frightful roar and yell, a sound of concentrated fury that, once heard, could never be forgotten. It was from the crowd outside, many of them from Avonmouth, and all frantic with indignation at the cruelty that had been perpetrated upon the helpless children. Their groans and execrations were pursuing the prison van, from which Maria Hatherton was at that moment making her exit ; and so fearful was the outcry that penetrated the court, that Fanny trembled with recollections of Indian horrors, looked wistfully for her protector the Colonel, and murmured fears that her aunt must have been very much terrified.

At that moment, however, a summons came for Lady Temple, as this was the case in which she was to bear witness. Alison followed, and was no sooner past the spectators, who gladly made way, than she found her arm drawn into Colonel Keith's. "Is he come ?" she asked.

"No," was rather signed than spoken. "Oh, Colin!" she sighed, but still there was no reply, only she was dragged on, downstairs and along dark passages, into a room furnished with a table, chairs, pens, ink, and paper, and lighted with gas, which revealed to her not only Mr. Grey, but one who, though eight years had made him stouter, redder, and rougher, had one of the most familiar faces of her youthful days. Her senses almost reeled with her as he held out his hand, saying heartily, "Well, Ailie, how are you? and how is Ermine? Where can this brother of yours be?"

"Harry! Mr. Beauchamp! You here!" she exclaimed, in the extremity of amazement.

"Here is Colin seeming to think that something may be done towards nailing this scoundrel for the present, so I am come at his call. We shall have the fellow in a moment." And then, by way of getting rid of embarrassment, he began talking to Mr. Grey about the County Hall, and the room, which Mr. Grey explained to be that of the clerk of the peace, lent for this occasion while the usual justice room was occupied. Alison heard all as in a dream, and presently Mauleverer entered, as usual spruce, artist-like, and self-possessed, and was accosted by Harry Beauchamp, "Good evening, Mr. Maddox, I am sorry to trouble you."

"I hope there is no misunderstanding, sir," was the reply. "I have not the pleasure of knowing for whom you take me."

Without regarding this reply, however, Mr. Beauchamp requested Mr. Grey to take his deposition, stating his own belief in the identity of the person before him with Richard Maddox, whom he charged with having delivered to him a letter falsely purporting to come from Edward Williams, demanding three hundred pounds, which upon this he

had delivered to the accused, to be forwarded to the said Mr. Williams.

Alison's heart beat violently at the ordeal before her of speaking to the genuineness of the letter. She had seen and suspected that to her brother-in-law, but she could not guess whether the flaws in that to Mr. Beauchamp would be equally palpable, and doubt and anxiety made her scarcely able to look at it steadily. To her great relief, however, she was able to detect sufficient variations to justify her assertion that it was not authentic, and she was able to confirm her statement by comparison of the writing with that of a short, indignant denial of all knowledge of the transaction, which Harry Beauchamp had happily preserved, though little regarding it at the time. She also showed the wrong direction, with the name of the place misspelt, according to her own copy of her sister-in-law's address, at the request of Maddox himself, and pointed out that a letter to Ermine from her brother bore the right form. The seal upon that to Mr. Beauchamp she likewise asserted to be the impression of one which her brother had lost more than a year before the date of the letter.

"Indeed, sir," said the accused, turning to Mr. Grey, "this is an exceedingly hard case. Here am I, newly acquitted, after nearly six weeks' imprisonment, on so frivolous a charge that it has been dismissed without my even having occasion to defend myself, or to call my own most respectable witnesses as to character, when another charge is brought forward against me in a name that there has been an unaccountable desire to impose on me. Even if I were the person that this gentleman supposes, there is nothing proved. He may very possibly have received a forged letter, but I

perceive nothing to fix the charge upon the party he calls Maddox. Let me call in my own witnesses, who had volunteered to come down from Bristol, and you will be convinced how completely mistaken the gentleman is."

To this Mr. Grey replied that the case against him was not yet closed, and cautioning him to keep his own witnesses back ; but he was urgent to be allowed to call them at once, as it was already late, and they were to go by the six o'clock train. Mr. Grey consented, and a messenger was sent in search of them. Mr. Beauchamp looked disturbed. "What say you to this, Colin ?" he asked, uneasily. "That man's audacity is enough to stagger one, and I only saw him three times at the utmost."

"Never fear," said Colin, "delay is all in our favour."

At the same time Colin left them, and with him went some hope and confidence, leaving all to feel awkward and distressed during the delay that ensued, the accused expatiating all the time on the unreasonableness of bringing up an offence committed so many years ago, in the absence of the only witness who could prove the whole story, insisting, moreover, on his entire ignorance of the names of either Maddox or Williams.

The sight of his witnesses was almost welcome. They were a dissenting minister, and a neat, portly, respectable widow, the owner of a fancy shop, and both knew Mr. Mauleverer as a popular lecturer upon philanthropical subjects, who came periodically to Bristol, and made himself very acceptable. Their faith in him was genuine, and he had even interested them in the F.U.E.E. and the ladies that patronized it. The widow was tearfully indignant about the persecution that had been got up against him, and evidently intended to return with him in triumph, and endow him with

the fancy shop if he would condescend so far. The minister, too, spoke highly of his gifts and graces, but neither of them could carry back their testimony to his character for more than three years.

Mr. Grey looked at his watch, Harry Beauchamp was restless, and Alison felt almost faint with suspense ; but at last the tramp of feet was heard in the passage. Colonel Keith came first, and leaning over Alison's chair, said, "Lady Temple will wait for us at the inn. It will soon be all right."

At that moment a tall figure in mourning entered, attended by a policeman. For the first time, Mauleverer's coolness gave way, though not his readiness, and, turning to Mr. Grey, he exclaimed, "Sir, you do [not intend to be misled by the malignity of a person of this description."

"Worse than a murderer ! " gasped the scandalized widow Dench. " Well, I never ! "

Mr. Grey was obliged to be peremptory, in order to obtain silence, and enforce that, let the new witness be what she might, her evidence must be heard.

She had come in with the habitual village curtsey to Mr. Beauchamp, and putting back her veil, disclosed to Alison the piteous sight of the well-remembered features, once so bright with intelligence and innocence, and now sunk and haggard with the worst sorrows of womanhood. Her large glittering eyes did not seem to recognise Alison, but they glared upon Mauleverer with a strange terrible fixedness, as if unable to see any one else. To Alison the sight was inexpressibly painful, and she shrank back, as it were, in dread of meeting the eyes once so responsive to her own.

Mr. Grey asked the woman the name of the person before her, and looking at him with the same fearful steadiness, she

pronounced it to be Richard Maddox, though he had of late called himself Mauleverer.

The man quailed for a moment, then collecting himself, said, "I now understand the incredible ingratitude and malignity that have pointed out against me these hitherto unaccountable slanders. It is a punishment for insufficient inquiry into character. But you, sir, in common justice, will protect me from the aspersions of one who wishes to drag me down in her justly merited fall."

"Sentenced for three years! To take *her* examination!" muttered Mrs. Dench, and with some difficulty these exclamations were silenced, and Maria Hatherton called on for her evidence.

Concise, but terrible in its clear brevity, was the story of the agent tampering with her, the nursemaid, until she had given him access to the private rooms, where he had turned over the papers. On the following day, Mr. Williams had been inquiring for his seal-ring, but she herself had not seen it again till some months after, when she had left her place, and was living in lodgings provided for her by Maddox, when she had found the ring in the drawer of his desk; her suspicion had then been first excited by his displeasure at her proposing to him to return it, thinking it merely there by accident, and she had afterwards observed him endeavouring to copy fragments of Mr. Williams's writing. These he had crushed up and thrown aside, but she had preserved them, owning that she did not know what might come of them, and the family had been very kind to her.

The seal and the scraps of paper were here produced by the policeman who had them in charge. The seal perfectly coincided with that which had closed the letter to Harry

Beauchamp, and was, moreover, identified by both Alison and Colonel Keith. It was noticeable, too, that one of these fragments was the beginning of a note to Mr. Beauchamp, as "Dear H." and this, though not Edward's most usual style of addressing his friend, was repeated in the demand for the £300.

"Sir," said the accused, "of course I have no intention of intimating that a gentleman like the Honourable Colonel Keith has been in any collusion with this unhappy woman, but it must be obvious to you that his wish to exonerate his friend has induced him to give too easy credence to this person's malignant attempts to fasten upon one whom she might have had reason to regard as a benefactor the odium of the transactions that she acknowledges to have taken place between herself and this Maddox, thereto incited, no doubt, by some resemblance which must be strong, since it has likewise deceived Mr. Beauchamp."

Mr. Grey looked perplexed and vexed, and asked Mr. Beauchamp if he could suggest any other person able to identify Maddox. He frowned, said there must have been workmen at the factory, but knew not where they were, looked at Colin Keith, asked Alison if she or her sister had ever seen Maddox, then declared he could lay his hands on no one but Dr. Long at Belfast.

Mauleverer vehemently exclaimed against the injustice of detaining him till a witness could be summoned from that distance. Mr. Grey evidently had his doubts, and began to think of calling in some fresh opinion whether he had sufficient grounds for committal, and Alison's hopes were only sustained by Colin's undaunted looks, when there came a knock at the door, and, as much to the surprise of Alison

as of every one else, there entered an elderly maid-servant, leading a little girl by the hand, and Colonel Keith going to meet the latter, said, "Do not be frightened, my dear, you have only to answer a few questions as plainly and clearly as you can."

Awed, silent, and dazzled by the sudden gas-light, she clung to his hand, but evidently distinguished no one else; and he placed her close to the magistrate saying, "This is Mr. Grey, Rose, tell him your name."

And Mr. Grey taking her hand and repeating the question, the clear little silvery voice answered,

"I am Rose Ermine Williams."

"And how old are you, my dear?"

"I was eight on the last of June."

"She knows the nature of an oath?" asked Mr. Grey of the Colonel.

"Certainly, you can soon satisfy yourself of that."

"My dear," then said Mr. Grey, taking her by the hand again, and looking into the brown intelligent eyes, "I am sure you have been well taught. Can you tell me what is meant by taking an oath before a magistrate?"

"Yes," said Rose, colour flushing into her face, "it is calling upon Almighty God to hear one speak the truth." She spoke so low that she could hardly be heard, and she looked full of startled fear and distress, turning her face up to Colonel Keith with a terrified exclamation, "Oh please, why am I here, what am I to say?"

He was sorry for her; but her manifest want of preparation was all in favour of the cause, and he soothed her by saying, "Only answer just what you are asked as clearly as you can, and Mr. Grey will soon let you go. He knows

you would try any way to speak the truth, but as he is going to examine you as a magistrate, he must ask you to take the oath first."

Rose repeated the oath in her innocent tones, and perhaps their solemnity or the fatherly gentleness of Mr. Grey reassured her, for her voice trembled much less when she answered his next inquiry, who her parents were.

"My mother is dead," she said; "my father is Mr. Williams; he is away at Ekaterinburg."

"Do you remember any time before he was at Ekaterinburg?"

"Oh yes; when we lived at Kensington, and he had the patent glass works."

"Now, turn round and say if there is any one here whom you know?"

Rose, who had hitherto stood facing Mr. Grey, with her back to the rest of the room, obeyed, and at once exclaimed, "Aunt Alison," then suddenly recoiled, and grasped at the Colonel.

"What is it, my dear?"

"It is—it is Mr. Maddox;" and with another gasp of fright, "and Maria! Oh, let me go."

But Mr. Grey put his arm round her, and assured her that no one could harm her, Colonel Keith let his fingers be very hard pinched, and her aunt came nearer, all telling her that she had only to make her answers distinctly; and though still shrinking, she could reply to Mr. Grey's question whom she meant by Mr. Maddox.

"The agent for the glass—my father's agent."

"And who is Maria?"

"She was my nurse."

“When did you last see the person you call Mr. Maddox?”

“Last time, I was sure of it, was when I was walking on the esplanade at Avonchester with Colonel Keith,” said Rose, very anxious to turn aside and render her words inaudible.

“I suppose you can hardly tell when that was?”

“Yes, it was the day before you went away to Lord Keith’s wedding,” said Rose, looking to the Colonel.

“Had you seen him before?”

“Twice when I was out by myself, but it frightened me so that I never looked again.”

“Can you give me any guide to the time?”

She was clear that it had been after Colonel Keith’s first stay at Avonmouth, but that was all; and being asked if she had ever mentioned these meetings, “Only when Colonel Keith saw how frightened I was, and asked me.”

“Why were you frightened?” asked Mr. Grey, on a hint from the Colonel.

“Because I could not quite leave off believing the dreadful things Mr. Maddox and Maria said they would do to me if I told.”

“Told what?”

“About Mr. Maddox coming and walking with Maria when she was out with me,” gasped Rose, trying to avert her head, and not comforted by hearing Mr. Grey repeat her words to these tormentors of her infancy.

A little encouragement, however, brought out the story of the phosphoric letters, the lions, and the vision of Maddox growling in the dressing-room. The date of the apparition could hardly be hoped for, but fortunately Rose remembered that it was two days before her mamma’s birth-day; because

she had felt it so hard to be eaten up before the *fête*, and this date tallied with that given by Maria of her admitting her treacherous admirer into the private rooms.

“The young lady may be precocious, no doubt, sir,” here said the accused, “but I hardly see why she has been brought here. You can attach no weight to the confused recollections of so young a child, of matters that took place so long ago.”

“The question will be what weight the jury will attach to them at the assizes,” said Mr. Grey.

“You will permit me to make one inquiry of the young lady, sir. Who told her whom she might expect to see here?”

Mr. Grey repeated the query, and Rose answered, “Nobody; I knew my aunt and the Colonel and Lady Temple were gone in to Avonchester, and Aunt Ermine got a note from the Colonel to say that I was to come in to him with Tibbie in a fly.”

“Did you know what you were wanted for?”

“No, I could not think. I only knew they came to get the woman punished for being so cruel to the poor little girls.”

“Do you know who that person was?”

“Mrs. Rawlins,” was the ready answer.

“I think,” said Mr. Grey to the accused, “that you must perceive that, with such coincidence of testimony as I have here, I have no alternative but to commit you for the summer assizes.”

Mauleverer murmured something about an action for false imprisonment, but he did not make it clear, and he was evidently greatly crestfallen. He had no doubt hoped to brazen

out his assumed character sufficiently to disconcert Mr. Beauchamp's faith in his own memory, and though he had carried on the same game after being confronted with Maria, it was already becoming desperate. He had not reckoned upon her deserting his cause even for her own sake, and the last chance of employing her antecedents to discredit her testimony, had been overthrown by Rose's innocent witness to their mutual relations, a remembrance which had been burnt in on her childish memory by the very means taken to secure her silence. When the depositions were read over, their remarkable and independent accordance was most striking ; Mrs. Dench had already been led away by the minister, in time to catch her train, just when her sobs of indignation at the deception were growing too demonstrative, and the policeman resumed the charge of Maria Hatherton.

Little Rose looked up to her, saying, "Please, Aunt Ailie, may I speak to her ?"

Alison had been sitting restless and perplexed between impulses of pity and repulsion, and doubts about the etiquette of the justice room ; but her heart yearned over the girl she had cherished, and she signed permission to Rose, whose timidity had given way amid excitement and encouragement.

"Please, Maria," she said, "don't be angry with me for telling ; I never did till Colonel Keith asked me, and I could not help it. Will you kiss me and forgive me as you used ?"

The hard fierce eyes, that had not wept over the child's coffin, filled with tears.

"Oh, Miss Rose, Miss Rose, do not come near me. Oh, if I had minded you—and your aunts—" And the pent-up misery of the life that had fallen lower and lower since the

first step in evil, found its course in a convulsive sob and shriek, so grievous that Alison was thankful for Colin's promptitude in laying hold of Rose, and leading her out of the room before him. Alison felt obliged to follow, yet could not bear to leave Maria to policemen and prison warders.

“Maria, poor Maria, I am so sorry for you, I will try to come and see you——”

But her hand was seized with an imperative, “Ailie, you must come, they are all waiting for you.”

How little had she thought her arm would ever be drawn into that arm, so unheeded by both.

“So that is Edward’s little girl ! Why, she is the sweetest little clear-headed thing I have seen a long time. She was the saving of us.”

“It was well thought of by Colin.”

“Colin is a lawyer spoilt—that’s a fact. A first-rate get-up of a case !”

“And you think it safe now ?”

“Nothing safer, so Edward turns up. How he can keep away from such a child as that, I can’t imagine. Where is she ? Oh, here——” as they came into the porch in fuller light, where the Colonel and Rose waited for them. “Ha, my little Ailie, I must make better friends with you.”

“My name is Rose, not Ailie,” replied the little girl.

“Oh, aye ! Well, it ought to have been, what d’ye call her—that was a Daniel come to judgment ?”

“Portia,” returned Rose ; “but I don’t think that is pretty at all.”

“And where is Lady Temple ?” anxiously asked Alison. “She must be grieved to be detained so long.”

“ Oh ! Lady Temple is well provided for,” said the Colonel, “ all the magistrates and half the bar are at her feet. They say the grace and simplicity of her manner of giving her evidence were the greatest contrast to poor Rachel’s.”

“ But where is she ? ” still persisted Alison.

“ At the hotel ; Maria’s was the last case of the day, and she went away directly after it, with such a choice of escorts that I only just spoke to her.”

And at the hotel they found the waggonette at the gateway, and Lady Temple in the parlour with Sir Edward Morden, who, late as it was, would not leave her till he had seen her with the rest of the party. She sprang up to meet them, and was much relieved to hear that Mauleverer was again secured. “ Otherwise,” she said, “ it would have been all my fault for having acted without asking advice. I hope I shall never do so again.”

She insisted that all should go home together in the waggonette, and Rose found herself upon Mr. Beauchamp’s knee, serving as usual as a safety valve for the feelings of her aunt’s admirers. There was no inconstancy on her part, she would much have preferred falling to the lot of her own Colonel, but the open carriage drive was rather a risk for him in the night air ; and though he had undertaken it in the excitement, he soon found it requisite to muffle himself up, and speak as little as possible. Harry Beauchamp talked enough for both. He was in high spirits, partly, as Colin suspected, with the escape from a dull formal home, and partly with the undoing of a wrong that had rankled in his conscience more than he had allowed to himself. Lady Temple, her heart light at the convalescence of her sons, was pleased with everything, liked him extremely, and an-

swered gaily ; and Alison enjoyed the resumption of pleasant habits of days gone by. Yet, delightful as it all was, there was a sense of disenchantment : she was marvelling all the time how she could have suffered so much on Harry Beau-champ's account. The rejection of him had weighed like a stone upon her heart, but now it seemed like freedom to have escaped his companionship for a lifetime.

Presently a horse's feet were heard on the road before them ; there was a meeting and a halt, and Alick Keith's voice called out—"How has it gone ?"

"Why, were you not in court ?"

"What ! I go to hear my friends baited ?"

"Where were you then ?"

"At Avonmouth."

"Oh, then you have seen the boys," cried Lady Temple.
"How is Conrade ?"

"Quite himself. Up to a prodigious amount of indoor croquet. But how has it gone ?"

"Such a shame !" returned Lady Temple. "They acquitted the dreadful man, and the poor woman, whom he drove to *it*, has a year's imprisonment and hard labour !"

"Acquitted ! What, is he off ?"

"Oh, no, no ! he is safe, and waiting for the Assizes ; all owing to the Colonel and little Rose."

"He is committed for the former offence," said Colonel Keith ; "the important one."

"That's right ! Good night ! And how," he added, reining back his horse, "did your cousin get through it ?"

"Oh, they were so hard on her !" cried Lady Temple. "I could hardly bring myself to speak to Sir Edward after it ! It was as if he thought it all her fault !"

“Her evidence broke down completely,” said Colonel Keith. “Sir Edward spared her as much as he could ; but the absurdity of her whole conduct was palpable. I hope she has had a lesson.”

Alick’s impatient horse flew on with him, and Colin muttered to Alison under his mufflers,—“I never could make out whether that is the coolest or the most sensitive fellow living !”

CHAPTER VIII.

THE AFTER CLAP.

“ I have read in the marvellous heart of man,
That strange and mystic scroll,
That an army of phantoms vast and wan,
Beleaguer the human soul.

“ Encamped beside life’s rushing stream,
In Fancy’s misty light,
Gigantic shapes and shadows gleam
Portentous through the night.”

The Belieaguered City, LONGFELLOW.

A DINNER party at the Deanery in the sessions week was an institution, but Rachel, lying on the sofa in a cool room, had thought herself exempt from it, and was conscious for the time of but one wish, namely, to be let alone, and to be able to shut her eyes, without finding the lids, as it were, lined with tiers of gazing faces, and curious looks turned on her, and her ears from the echo of the roar of fury that had dreadfully terrified both her and her mother, and she felt herself to have merited! The crush of public censure was not at the moment so overwhelming as the strange morbid effect of having been the focus of those many, many glances, and if she reflected at all, it was with a weary speculating wonder whether one pair of dark grey eyes had been among those levelled at her. She thought that if they had,

she could not have missed either their ironical sting, or perchance some kindly gleam of sympathy, such as had sometimes surprised her from under the flaxen lashes.

There she had lain, unmolested and conscious of a certain relief in the exceeding calm ; the grey pinnacle of the cathedral, and a few branches of an elm-tree alone meeting her eye through the open window, and the sole sound the cawing of the rooks, whose sailing flight amused and attracted her glance from time to time with dreamy interest. Grace had gone into court to hear Maria Hatherton's trial, and all was still.

The first break was when her mother and Miss Wellwood came in, after having wandered gently together round the warm, walled Deanery garden, comparing notes about their myrtles and geraniums. Then it was that amid all their tender inquiries after her headache, and their administration of afternoon tea, it first broke upon Rachel that they expected her to go down to dinner.

“Pray excuse me,” she said imploringly, looking at her mother for support ; “indeed, I don't know that I could sit out a dinner ! A number of people together make me so dizzy and confused.”

“Poor child !” said Miss Wellwood, kindly, but looking to Mrs. Curtis in her turn. “Perhaps, as she has been so ill, the evening might be enough.”

“Oh,” exclaimed Rachel, “I hope to be in bed before you have finished dinner. Indeed I am not good company for any one.”

“Don't say that, my dear ;” and Miss Wellwood looked puzzled.

“Indeed, my dear,” said Mrs. Curtis, evidently distressed,

“I think the exertion would be good for you, if you could only think so.”

“Yes, indeed, said Miss Wellwood, catching at the notion ; “it is your mind that needs the distraction, my dear.”

“I am distracted enough already,” poor Rachel said, putting her hand up. “Indeed, I do not want to be disobligeing,” she said, interpreting her mother’s anxious gestures to mean that she was wanting in civility ; “it is very kind in you, Miss Wellwood, but this has been a very trying day, and I am sure I can give no pleasure to anybody, so if I might only be let off.”

“It is not so much——” began Miss Wellwood, getting into a puzzle, and starting afresh. “Indeed, my dear, my brother and I could not bear that you should do anything you did not like, only you see it would never do for you to seem to want to shut yourself up.”

“I should think all the world must feel as if I ought to be shut up for life,” said Rachel, dejectedly.

“Ah ! but that is the very thing. If you do not show yourself it will make such a talk.”

Rachel had nearly said, “Let them talk ;” but though she felt tormented to death, habitual respect to these two gentle, nervous, elderly women made her try to be courteous, and she said, “Indeed, I cannot much care, provided I don’t hear them.”

“Ah ! but you don’t know, my dear,” said Mrs. Curtis, seeing her friend looked dismayed at this indifférence. “Indeed, dear Miss Wellwood, she does not know ; we thought it would be so awkward for her in court.”

“Know what ?” exclaimed Rachel, sitting upright, and

putting down her feet. "What have you been keeping from me?"

"Only—only, my dear, people will say such things, and nobody could think it that knew you."

"What?" demanded Rachel.

"Yes," said Mrs. Curtis, perhaps, since her daughter was to have the shock, rather glad to have a witness to the surprise it caused her: "you know people will gossip, and some one has put it about that—that this horrid man was—"

Mrs. Curtis paused, Miss Wellwood was as pink as her cap strings. Rachel grasped the meaning at last. "Oh!" she said, with less reticence than her elders, "there must needs be a spice of flirtation to give piquancy to the mess of gossip! I don't wonder, there are plenty of people who judge others by themselves, and think that motive must underlie everything! I wonder who imagines that I am fallen so low?"

"There, I knew she would take it in that way," said Mrs. Curtis. "And so you understand us, my dear, we could not bear to ask you to do anything so distressing except for your own sake."

"I am far past caring for my own sake," said Rachel, "but for yours and Grace's, mother, I will give as much ocular demonstration as I can, that I am not pining for this hero with a Norman name. I own I should have thought none of the Dean's friends would have needed to be convinced."

"Oh, no! no! but—" Miss Wellwood made a great confusion of noes, buts, and my dears, and Mrs. Curtis came to the rescue. "After all, my love, one can't so much wonder! You have always been very peculiar, you know, and so clever, and you took up this so eagerly. And then

the Greys saw you so unwilling to prosecute. And—and I have always allowed you too much liberty—ever since your poor dear papa was taken—and now it has come upon you, my poor child ! Oh, I hope dear Fanny will take warning by me," and off went poor Mrs. Curtis into a fit of sobs.

"Mother—mother ! this is worse than anything," exclaimed Rachel in an agony, springing to her feet, and flying after sal volatile, but feeling frightfully helpless without Grace, the manager of all Mrs. Curtis's ailments and troubles. Grace would have let her quietly cry it out. Rachel's remedies and incoherent protestations of all being her own fault only made things worse, and perhaps those ten minutes were the most overwhelming of all the griefs that Rachel had brought on herself. However, what with Miss Wellwood's soothing, and her own sense of the becoming, Mrs. Curtis struggled herself into composure again by the time the maid came to dress them for dinner ; Rachel all the while longing for Grace's return, not so much for the sake of hearing the verdict, as of knowing whether the mother ought to be allowed to go down to dinner, so shaken did she look ; for indeed, besides her distress for her daughter, no small ingredient in her agitation was this recurrence to a stated custom of her husband's magisterial days.

Persuasion was unavailing. At any cost the Curtis family must present an unassailable front to the public eye, and if Mrs. Curtis had forced forward her much tried and suffering daughter, far more would she persist in devoting herself to gaiety and indifference, but her nervousness was exceeding, and betrayed itself in a continual wearying for Grace, without whom neither her own dress nor Rachel's could be arranged to her satisfaction, and she was absolutely incapable of not

worrying Rachel about every fold, every plait, every bow, in a manner that from any one else would have been unbearable; but those tears had frightened Rachel into a penitent submission that endured with an absolute semblance of cheerfulness each of these torments. The languor and exhaustion had been driven away, and feverish excitement had set in, not so much from the spirit of defiance that the two elder ladies had expected to excite, as from the having been goaded into a reckless determination to sustain her part. No matter for the rest.

It often happened in these parties that the ladies would come in from the country in reasonable time, while their lords would be detained much later in court; so when the cathedral clock had given notice of the half-hour, Mrs. Curtis began to pick up fan and handkerchief, and prepare to descend. Rachel suggested there would be no occasion so to do till Grace's return, since it was plain that no one could yet be released.

“Yes, my dear, but perhaps—don't you think it might be remarked as if you chose to keep out of sight?”

“Oh, very well.”

Rachel followed her mother down, sustained by one hope, that Captain Keith would be there. No; the Deanery did not greatly patronize the barracks; there was not much chance of any gentleman under forty, except, perhaps, in the evening. And at present the dean himself and one canon were the entire gentleman element among some dozen ladies. Everybody knew that the cause of delay was the trial of the cruel matron, and added to the account of Rachel's iniquities their famished and weary state of expectation, the good Dean gyrating among the groups, trying to make conversation,

which every one felt too fretful and too hungry to sustain with spirit. Rachel sat it out, trying to talk whenever she saw her mother's anxious eyes upon her, but failing in finding anything to say, and much doubting whether her neighbours liked talking to her.

At last gentlemen began to appear in twos and threes, and each made some confidence to the womankind that first absorbed him, but no one came in Rachel's way, and the girl beside her became too unfeignedly curious to support even the semblance of conversation, but listened for scraps of intelligence. Something was flying about respecting "a gentleman who came down by the train," and something about "Lady Temple" and "admirable," and the young lady seized the first opportunity of deserting Rachel, and plunging into the *mélée*. Rachel sat on, sick with suspense, feeling utterly unable to quit her seat. Still they waited, the whole of the party were not arrived, and here was the curfew ringing, and that at the Deanery, which always felt injured if it were seven o'clock before people were in the dining-room! Grace must be upstairs dressing, but to reach her was impossible!

At last Mr. Grey was announced, and he had mercy upon Rachel; he came up to her as soon as he could without making her remarkable, and told her the cause of his delay had been the necessity of committing Mauleverer upon an accusation by a relation of Colonel Keith, of very extensive frauds upon Miss Williams's brother. Rachel's illness and the caution of the Williamses had prevented her from being fully aware of the complication of their affairs with her own, and she became paler and paler, as she listened to the partial explanation, though she was hardly able as yet to understand it. "The woman?" she asked.

“Sentenced to a year’s imprisonment with hard labour ; and let me tell you, Rachel, you had a most narrow escape there ! If that army doctor had not come in time to see the child alive, they could not have chosen but have an inquest, and no mortal can tell what might have been the decision about your homœopathy. You might have been looking forward to a worse business than this at the next assizes.”

Mr. Grey had done his work at last ! The long waiting, the weary constraint, and at last the recurrence of Lovedy’s sufferings and her own share in them, entirely overcame her. Mists danced before her eyes, and the very sensation that had been so studiously avoided was produced by her fainting helplessly away in her chair, while Mr. Grey was talking to her.

To be sure it brought deliverance from the multitude, and she awoke in the quiet of her room, upon her bed, in the midst of the despairing compunction of the mother, and the tender cares of Grace, but she was too utterly overdone for even this to be much relief to her ; and downstairs poor Miss Wellwood’s one desire was to hinder the spread of the report that her swoon had been caused by the tidings of Mauleverer’s apprehension. It seemed as if nothing else had been wanting to make the humiliation and exposure complete. Rachel had despised fainting ladies, and had really hitherto been so superabundant in strength that she had no experience of the symptoms, or she might have escaped in time. But there she lay, publicly censured before the dignitaries of her county for moral folly, and entirely conquered before the rest of the world by the physical weakness she had most contemned.

Then the mother was so terrified and distressed that all sorts of comforting reassurances were required, and the chief

object soon became to persuade her to go downstairs and leave Rachel to her bed. And at last the thought of civility and of the many Mrs. Grundys prevailed, and sent her downstairs, but there was little more comfort for Rachel even in being left to herself—that for which she had a few minutes before most ardently longed.

That night was perhaps the most painful one of her whole life. The earnest desire to keep her mother from uneasiness, and the longing to be unmolested, made her play her part well when the mother and Grace came up to see her before going to bed, and they thought she would sleep off her over-fatigue and excitement, and yielded to her desire that they should bid her good night, and leave her to rest.

But what sort of rest was it? Sometimes even her own personal identity was gone, and she would live over again in the poor children, the hunger and the blows, or she would become Mrs. Rawlins, and hear herself sentenced for the savage cruelty, or she would actually stand in court under sentence for manslaughter. Her pulses throbbed up to fever pitch, head and cheeks burnt, the very power to lie still was gone, and whether she commanded her thoughts or lapsed into the land of dreams, they worked her equal woe.

Now it was the world of gazing faces, feverishly magnified, multiplied, and pressing closer and closer on her, till she could have screamed to dispel them; now it was her mother weeping over the reports to which she had given occasion, and accusing herself of her daughter's errors; and now it was Lovedy Kelland's mortal agony; now the mob, thirsting for vengeance, were shouting for justice on her, as the child's murderer, and she was shrieking to Alick Keith to leave her to her fate, and only save her mother.

It would hardly be too much to say that the positive wretchedness of actually witnessing the child's death was doubled in these its imaginary repetitions on that still more suffering night of waking dreams, when every solemn note of the cathedral clock, every resolute proclamation from its fellow in the town hall, every sharp reply from the domestic timepiece in the Deanery fell on her ears, generally recalling her at least to full consciousness of her identity and whereabouts, and dispelling the delusion.

But, then, what comfort was there? Veritably she had caused suffering and death; she had led to the peril of Fanny's children; she had covered her mother with shame and grief! Nay, in her exaggerated tone of feeling, she imagined that distress and poverty might have been entailed on that beloved mother. Those title-deeds—no intelligence. Captain Keith had taken no notice. Perhaps he heard and believed those degrading reports! He had soul enough to pity and sympathize with the failure of extended views of beneficence; he despised the hypocrisy that had made charity a cloak for a credulous debasing attachment, and to such an object! He might well avoid her! His sister had always bantered her on what had seemed too absurd to be rebutted, and, at any rate, this fainting fit would clinch his belief. No doubt he believed it. And if he did, why should not every one else whose opinion she cared for: Ermine, her Colonel, even gentle Fanny—no, she would never believe any harm; she had suffered too much in her cause.

Oh, for simple genuine charity like Fanny's, with eyes clear with innocence and humility! And now what was before her? should she ever be allowed to hide her head, or should she be forced again to brave that many-eyed world?

Perhaps the title-deed business would prove utter ruin. It would have been acceptable to herself, but her mother and sister!

Chastisement! Yes, it was just chastisement for headstrong folly and conceit. She had heard of bending to the rod and finding it a cross, but here came the dreadful confusion of unreality, and of the broken habit of religious meditation except as matter of debate. She did not know till her time of need how deeply sneers had eaten into her heart. The only text that would come to her mind was, "And in that day they shall roar against them like the roaring of the sea; and if one look unto the land, behold darkness and sorrow, and the light is darkened in the heavens thereof." Every effort at prayer or at calm recall of old thoughts still ended in that desolate verse. The first relief to these miserable dreams was the cool clear morning light, and by-and-by the early cathedral bells, then Grace's kind greeting made her quite herself; no longer feverish, but full of lassitude and depression. She would not listen to Grace's entreaties that she would remain in bed. "No place was so hateful to her," she said, and she came down apparently not more unwell than had been the case for many days past, so that after breakfast her mother saw no reason against leaving her on the sofa, while going out to perform some commissions in the town, attended, of course, by Grace. Miss Wellwood promised that she should not be disturbed, and she found that she must have been asleep, for she was taken by surprise by the opening of the door, and the apologetic face of the butler, who told her that a gentleman had asked if she would see him, and presented the card of "Captain Alexander Keith."

Eagerly she desired that he should be admitted, tremu-

lously she awaited his sentence upon her mother's peace ; and, as she thought of all he must have heard, all he must believe, she felt as if she must flee ; or, if that were impossible, cower in shrinking dread of the glance of his satirical eye !

Here he was, and she could not look or speak, nor did he ; she only felt that his clasp of greeting was kind, was anxious, and he put forward the easy-chair, into which she sank, unable to stand. He said, " I saw your mother and sister going into the town. I thought you would like to hear of this business at once."

" Oh yes, thank you."

" I could not see the man till the day before yesterday," he said, " and I could get nothing satisfactory from him. He said he had taken the papers to a legal friend, but was not authorized to give his name. Perhaps his views may be changed by his present condition. I will try him again if you like."

" Thank you, thank you ! Do you think this is true ? "

" He is too cunning a scoundrel to tell unnecessary lies, and very likely he may have disposed of them to some Jew attorney ; but I think nothing is to be feared but some annoyance."

" And annoyance to my mother is the one thing I most fear," sighed Rachel, helplessly.

" There might be a mode of much lessening it to her," he said.

" Oh, what ? Tell me, and I would do it at any cost."

" Will you ? " and he came nearer. " At the cost of yourself ? "

She thrilled all over, and convulsively grasped the arm of her chair.

"Would not a son be the best person to shield her from annoyance," he added, trying for his usual tone ; but failing, he exclaimed, "Rachel, Rachel, let me !"

She put her hands over her face, and cried, "Oh ! oh ! I never thought of this."

"No," he said, "and I know what you do think of it, but indeed you need not be wasted. Our women and children want so much done for them, and none of our ladies are able or willing. Will you not come and help me ?"

"Don't talk to me of helping ! I do nothing but spoil and ruin."

"Not now ! That is all gone and past. Come and begin afresh."

"No, no, I am too disagreeable."

"May not I judge for myself ?" he said, drawing nearer, and his voice falling into tremulous tenderness.

"Headstrong—overbearing."

"Try," and his smile overbore her.

"Oh no, no, nobody can bear me ! This is more than you—you ought to do—than any one should," she faltered, not knowing what she said.

"Than any one to whom you were not most dear !" was the answer, and he was now standing over her, with the dew upon his eyelashes.

"Oh, that can't be. Bessie said you always took up whatever other people hated, and I know it is only that——"

"Don't let Bessie's sayings come between us now, Rachel. This goes too deep," and he had almost taken her hand, when with a start she drew it back, saying, "But you know what they say !"

"Have they been stupid enough to tell you ?" he exclaimed.

“ Confute them then, Rachel—dolts that can’t believe in self-devotion ! Laugh at their beards. This is the way to put an end to it !”

“ Oh no, they would only detest you for my sake. I can’t,” she said again, bowed down again with shame and dejection.

“ I’ll take care of that !” he said with the dry tone that perhaps was above all reassurance, and conquered her far enough to enable him to take possession of the thin and still listless hand.

“ Then,” he said, “ you will let me take this whole matter in hand ; and if the worst comes to the worst, we will make up to the charity out of the Indian money, without vexing the mother.”

“ I can’t let you suffer for my miserable folly.”

“ Too late to say that !” he answered ; and as her eyes were raised to him in startled inquiry, he said gravely, “ These last weeks have shown me that your troubles *must* be mine.”

A hand was on the door, and Rachel fled, in time to screen her flight from Miss Wellwood, whom Alick met with his usual undisturbed front, and inquiries for Mrs. Curtis.

That good lady was in the town more worried than flattered by the numerous inquiries after Rachel’s health, and conscious of having gone rather near the wind in making the best of it. She had begun to dread being accosted by any acquaintance, and Captain Keith, sauntering near the archway of the close, was no welcome spectacle. She would have passed him with a curt salutation, but he grasped her hand, saying, “ May I have a few words with you ?”

“ Not Fanny—not the children !” cried Mrs. Curtis in dismay.

"No indeed. Only myself," and a gleam of intelligence under his eyelashes and judicious pressure of his hand conveyed volumes to Grace, who had seen him often during Rachel's illness, and was not unprepared. She merely said that she would see how her sister was, substituted Captain Keith's arm for her own as her mother's support, and hurried away, to encounter Miss Wellwood's regrets that, in spite of all her precautions, dear Rachel had been disturbed by "a young officer, I believe. We see him often at the cathedral, and somebody said it was his sister whom Lord Keith married."

"Yes, we know him well, and he is a Victoria Cross man," said Grace, beginning to assume his reflected glory.

"So some one said, but the Dean never calls on the officers unless there is some introduction, or there would be no end to it. It was a mistake letting him in to disturb Rachel. Is your mother gone up to her, my dear?"

"No, I think she is in the cathedral yard. I just came in to see about Rachel," said Grace, escaping.

Miss Wellwood intended going out to join her old friend ; but, on going to put on her bonnet, she saw from the window Mrs. Curtis, leaning on the intruder's arm, conversing so confidentially that the Dean's sister flushed with amazement, and only hoped she had mentioned him with due respect. And under that southern cathedral wall good Mrs. Curtis took the longest walk she had indulged in for the last twenty years ; so that Grace, and even Rachel, beholding from the window, began to fear that the mother would be walked to death.

But then she had that supporting arm, and the moral support, that was infinitely more ! That daughter, the spoilt

pet of her husband, the subject of her pride, even when an enigma and an anxiety, whom she had lately been forced to think of as

“A maid whom there were few to praise,
And very few to love,”

she now found loved by one at least, and praised in terms that thrilled through and through the mother's heart in their truth and simplicity, for that sincerity, generosity, and unselfishness. It was her own daughter, her real Rachel, no illusion, that she heard described in those grave earnest words ; only while the whole world saw the errors and exaggerated them, here was one who sank them all in the sterling worth that so few would recognise. The dear old lady forgot all her prudence, and would hardly let him speak of his means ; but she soon saw that Rachel's present portion would be more than met on his side, and that no one could find fault with her on the score of inequality of fortune. He would have been quite able to retire, and live at ease ; but this he said at once and with decision he did not intend. His regiment was his hereditary home, and his father had expressed such strong wishes that he should not lightly desert his profession, that he felt bound to it by filial duty as well as by other motives. Moreover, he thought the change of life and occupation would be the best thing for Rachel, and Mrs. Curtis could not but acquiesce, little as she had even dreamt that a daughter of hers would marry into a marching regiment ! Her surrender of judgment was curiously complete. “Dear Alexander,” as thenceforth she called him, had assumed the mastery over her from the first turn they took under the cathedral ; and when at length he reminded her

that the clock was on the stroke of one, she accepted it on his infallible judgment, for her own sensations would have made her believe it not a quarter of an hour since the interview had begun.

Not a word had been granted on either side to the conventional vows of secrecy, always made to be broken, and perhaps each tacitly felt that the less secrecy the better for Rachel. Certain it is that Mrs. Curtis went into the Deanery with her head considerably higher, kissed Rachel vehemently, and, assuring her she knew all about it, and was happier than she had ever thought to be again, excused her from appearing at luncheon, and hurried down thereto, without giving any attention to a feeble entreaty that she would not go so fast. And when at three o'clock Rachel crept downstairs to get into the carriage for her return home, the good old Dean lay in wait for her, told her she must allow him an old friend's privilege, kissed her, congratulated her, and said he would beg to perform the ceremony.

"Oh, Mr. Dean, it is nothing like that."

He laughed, and handed her in.

"Mother, mother, how could you?" sighed Rachel, as they drove on.

"My dear, they were so kind; they could not help knowing!"

"But it can't be."

"Rachel, my child, you like him!"

"He does not know half about me yet. Mother, don't tell Fanny or any one till 'I have seen him again.'"

And the voice was so imperious with the wayward vehemence of illness that Mrs. Curtis durst not gainsay it. She did not know how Alick Keith was already silencing those

who asked if he had heard of the great event at the Dean's party. Still less did she guess at the letter at that moment in writing :—

“MY DEAR BESSIE,—Wish me joy. I have gone in for the uncroquetable lawn, and won it.—Your affectionate brother,

“A. C. KEITH.”

CHAPTER IX.

DEAR ALEXANDER.

“I pray thee now tell me, for which of my bad parts didst thou first fall in love with me ?”—*Much Ado about Nothing*.

ALICK, is this all chivalry ? ” inquired Colonel Keith, sitting by his fire, suffering considerably from his late drive, and hearing reports that troubled him.

“ Very chivalrous, indeed ? when there’s an old county property to the fore.”

“ For that matter, you have all been canny enough to have means enough to balance all that barren moorland. You are a richer man than I shall ever be.”

“ Without heiress-hunting ? ” said Alick, as though weighing his words.

“ Come, Alick, you need not put on a mask that does not fit you ! If it is not too late, take the risk into consideration, for I own I think the price of your championship somewhat severe.”

“ Ask Miss Williams.”

“ Ermine is grateful for much kindness, and is—yes—really fond of her.”

“ Then, Colonel, you ought to know that a sensible woman’s favourable estimate of one of her own sex outweighs the opinion men can form of her.”

“I grant that there are fine qualities ; but, Alick, regarding you, as I must necessarily do, from our former relations, you must let me speak if there is still time to warn you, lest your pity and sense of injustice should be entangling you in a connexion that would hardly conduce to make you happy or popular.”

“Popularity is not my line,” said Alick, looking composedly into the fire.

“Tell me first,” said the puzzled Colonel, “are you committed ?”

“No one can be more so.”

“Engaged !!!”

“I thought you would have known it from themselves ; but I find she has forbidden her mother to mention it till she has seen me again. And they talk of quiet, and shut me out !” gloomily added Alick.

The Colonel conceived a hope that the lady would abjure matrimony, and release this devoted knight, but in a few moments Alick burst out—

“Absurd ! She cannot mend with anything on her mind ! If I could have seen Mrs. Curtis or Grace alone, they might have heard reason ; but that old woman of a doctor was prosing about quiet and strain on the nerves. I know that sort of quiet, the best receipt for distraction !”

“Well, Alick,” said his friend, smiling, “you have at least convinced me that your heart is in the matter.”

“How should it not be ?” returned Alick.

“I was afraid it was only with the object of unjust vituperation.”

“No such thing. Let me tell you, Colonel, my heart has been in it ever since I felt the relief of meeting real truth

and unselfishness ! I liked her that first evening, when she was manfully chasing us off for frivolous danglers round her cousin ? I liked her for having no conventionalities, fast or slow, and especially for hating heroes ! And when my sister had helped to let her get into this intolerable web, how could I look on without feeling the nobleness that has never shifted blame from herself, but bowed, owned all, suffered—suffered—oh, how grievously ! ”

The Colonel was moved. “ With such genuine affection you should surely lead her and work upon her ! I trust you will be able.”

“ It is less that,” said Alick, rather resentfully, “ than sympathy that she wants. Nobody ever gave her that except your Ermine ! By-the-bye, is there any news of the brother ? ”

Colonel Keith shook his head. “ I believe I shall have to go to Russia,” he said with some dejection.

“ After that, reproach one with chivalry,” said Alick, lightly. “ Nay, I beg your pardon. Shall I take any message down to Mackarel Lane ? ”

“ Are you going ? ”

“ Well, yes, though I hardly ought to venture there till this embargo is taken off ; for she is the one person there will be some pleasure in talking to. Perhaps I may reckon you as the same in effect.”

The Colonel responded with a less cheerful look than usual, adding, “ I don’t know whether to congratulate you, Alick, on having to ask no one’s consent but your own at your age.”

“ Especially not my guardian’s ! ” said Alick, with the desired effect of making him laugh.

“ No, if you were my son, I would not interfere,” he added gravely. “ I only feared your not knowing what you

were about. I see you do know it, and it merely becomes a question of every man to his taste—except for one point, Alick. I am afraid there may have been much disturbance of her opinions."

"Surface work," said Alick, "some of the effects of the literature that paints contradiction as truth. It is only skin deep, and makes me wish all the more to have her with my uncle for a time. I wonder whether Grace would let me in if I went back again!"

No, Grace was obdurate. Mr. Frampton had spoken of a nervous fever, and commanded perfect quiescence; and Grace was the less tempted to transgress the order, because she really thought her mother was more in love with "dear Alexander" than Rachel was. Rachel was exceedingly depressed, restless, and feverish, and shrank from her mother's rejoicing, declaring that she was mistaken, and that nothing more must be said. She had never consented, and he must not make such a sacrifice; he would not when he knew better. Nay, in some moods, Rachel seemed to think even the undefined result of the interview an additional humiliation, and to feel herself falling, if not fallen, from her supreme contempt of love and marriage. The hurry, and the consent taken for granted, had certainly been no small elements in her present disturbed and overwhelmed state; and Grace, though understanding the motive, was disposed to resent the over-haste. Calm and time to think were promised to Rachel, but the more she had of both the more they hurt her. She tossed restlessly all night, and was depressed to the lowest ebb by day; but on the second day, ill as she evidently was, she insisted on seeing Captain Keith, declaring that she should never be better till she had made

him understand her. Her nurses saw that she was right ; and, besides, Mrs. Curtis's pity was greatly touched by dear Alexander's entreaties. So, as a desperate experiment, he was at last allowed to go into the dressing-room, where she was lying on the sofa. He begged to enter alone, only announced by a soft knock, to which she replied with a listless "Come in," and did not look up till she suddenly became conscious of a footfall firmer though softer than those she was used to. She turned, and saw who it was, who stood at a window opposite to her feet, drawing up the Venetian blind, from whose teasing divisions of glare and shade she had been hiding her eyes from the time she had come in, fretted by the low continuous tap of its laths upon the shutters. Her first involuntary exclamation was a sigh of relief.

"Oh, thank you. I did not know what it was that was such a nuisance."

"This is too much glare. Let me turn your sofa a little way round from it."

And as he did so, and she raised herself, he shook out her cushions, and substituted a cool chintz covered one for the hot crimson damask on which her head had been resting. "Thank you ! How do you know so well ?" she said with a long breath of satisfaction.

"By long trial," he said, very quietly seating himself beside her couch, with a stillness of manner that strangely hushed all her throbings ; and the very pleasure of lying really still was such that she did not at once break it. The lull of these few moments was inexpressibly sweet, but the pang that had crossed her so many times in the last two days and nights could not but return. She moved restlessly,

and he leant towards her with a soft-toned inquiry what it was she wanted.

“Don’t,” she said, raising herself. “No, don’t! I have thought more over what you said,” she continued, as if repeating the sentence she had conned over to herself. “You have been most generous, most noble; but—but,” with an effort of memory, “it would be wrong in me to accept such—oh! such a sacrifice; and when I tell you all, you will think it a duty to turn from me,” she added, pressing her hands to her temples. “And mind, you are not committed—you are free.”

“Tell me,” he said, bending towards her.

“I know you cannot overlook it! My faith—it is all confusion,” she said in a low awe-struck voice. “I do believe—I do wish to believe; but my grasp seems gone. I cannot rest or trust for thinking of the questions that have been raised! There,” she added in a strange interrogative tone.

“It is a cruel thing to represent doubt as the sign of intellect,” Alick said sadly; “but you will shake off the tormentors when the power of thinking and reasoning is come back.”

“Oh, if I could think so! The misery of darkness here—there—everywhere—the old implicit reliance gone, and all observance seeming like hypocrisy and unreality. There is no thinking, no enduring the intolerable maze.”

“Do not try to think now. You cannot bear it. We will try to face what difficulties remain when you are stronger.”

She turned her eyes full on him. “You do not turn away! You know you are free.”

“Turn from the sincerity that I prize?”

"You don't? I thought your views were exactly what would make you hate and loathe such bewilderment, and call it wilful;" there was something piteous in the way her eye sought his face.

"It was not wilful," he said; "it came of honest truth-seeking. And, Rachel, I think the one thing is now gone that kept that honesty from finding its way."

"Self-sufficiency!" she said with a groan; but with a sudden turn she exclaimed, "You don't trust to my surrendering my judgment. I don't think I am that kind of woman."

"Nor I that kind of man," he answered in his natural tone; then affectionately, "No, indeed I want you to aid mine."

She lay back, wearied with the effort, and disinclined to break the stillness. There was a move at the door; Mrs. Curtis, in an agony of restless anxiety, could not help coming to see that the interview was doing no harm.

"Don't go!" exclaimed Rachel, holding out her hand as he turned at the opening of the door. "Oh, mother!" and there was an evident sound of disappointment.

Mrs. Curtis was infinitely rejoiced to find her entrance thus inopportune. "I only wished just to be sure it was not too much," she said.

"Oh, mother, it is the first peace I have known for weeks! Can't you stay?" looking up to him, as her mother retreated to tell Grace that it was indeed all right.

This brought him to a footstool close beside her. "Thank you," he murmured. "I was wondering just then if it would hurt you or agitate you to give me some little satisfaction in going on with this. I know you are too true not to have told me at once if your objections were more personal than

those you have made ; but, Rachel, it is true, as you say, that you have never consented !”

The tone of these words made Rachel raise herself, turn towards him, and hold out both her hands. “ Oh,” she said, as he took them into his own, “ it was—it could be only that I cannot bear so much more than I deserve.”

“ What ! such an infliction ?” in his own dry way.

“ Such rest, such kindness, such generosity !”

“ No, Rachel, there is something that makes it neither kindness nor generosity. You know what I mean.”

“ And that is what overpowers me more than all,” she sighed, in the full surrender of herself. “ I ought not to be so very happy.”

“ That is all I want to hear,” he said, as he replaced her on her cushions, and sat by her, holding her hand, but not speaking till the next interruption, by one of the numerous convalescent meals, brought in by Grace, who looked doubtful whether she would be allowed to come in, and then was edified by the little arrangements he made, quietly taking all into his own hands, and wonderfully lessening a sort of fidget that Mrs. Curtis’s anxiety had attached to all that was done for Rachel. It was not for nothing that he had spent a year upon the sofa in the irritably sensitive state of nerves that Bessie had described ; and when he could speak to Grace alone, he gave her a lecture on those little refinements of unobtrusive care, that more demonstrative ailments had not availed to inculcate, and which Mrs. Curtis’s present restless anxiety rendered almost impossible. To hinder her from constantly aggravating the fever on the nerves by her fidgeting solicitude was beyond all power save his own, and that when he was actually in the house.

Morning after morning he rode to the Homestead to hear that Rachel had had a very bad night, and was very low, then was admitted to find Mrs. Curtis's fluttering, flurried attentions exasperating every wearied fibre with the very effort to force down fretfulness and impatience ; till, when she was left to him, a long space of the lull impressed on her by his presence was needful before he could attempt any of the quiet talk, or brief readings of poetry, by which he tried further to soothe and rest her spirits. He would leave her so calm and full of repose as to make him augur well for the next day ; but the moment his back was turned, something would always happen that set all the pulses in agitation again, and consigned her to a fresh night of feverish phantoms of the past. He even grew distracted enough to scold Grace fraternally as the only person he could scold.

“ You seem to nurse her on the principle of old Morris, the biggest officer among us, who kindly insisted on sitting up with me, and began by taking his seat upon my hand as it was lying spread out upon a pillow.”

“ Indeed, *Alick*,” said Grace, with tears in her eyes, “ I hardly know what to do. When you are not in the house, the mother is almost as much in a nervous fever as Rachel, and it is hardly in her power to keep from fretting her. It is all well when you are here.”

“ Then, Grace, there is only one thing to be done. The sooner I take Rachel away the better for both her and the mother.”

“ Oh, *Alick*, you will drive them both wild if you hurry it on.”

“ Look here. I believe I can get leave from Saturday till Tuesday. If I can get a hearing in those two days, I shall

try ; and depend upon it, Grace, this place is the worst that Rachel can be in."

"Can you come out here for three whole days ? Oh, what a comfort !"

And what a comfort ! was re-echoed by Mrs. Curtis, who had erected dear Alexander to a pedestal of infallibility, and was always treated by him with a considerate kindness that made her pity Fanny for the number of years that must pass before Stephana could give her the supreme blessing of a son-in-law. Fanny, on her side, had sufficient present blessing in collecting her brood around her, after the long famine she had suffered, and regretted only that this month had rendered Stephana's babyhood more perceptibly a matter of the past ; and that, in the distance, school days were advancing towards Conrade, though it was at least a comfort that his diphtheria had secured him at home for another half year, and the Colonel had so much to think about that he had not begun his promised researches into schools.

The long-looked-for letters came after a weary interval of expectation, the more trying to Ermine because the weather had been so bitter that Colin could not shake off his cold, nor venture beyond his own fireside, where Rose daily visited him, and brought home accounts that did not cheer her aunt.

Edward wrote shortly to his sister, as if almost annoyed at the shower of letters that had by every post begun to recall his attention from some new invention on the means of assaying metals :—

"I am sorry you have stirred up Keith to the renewal of this painful subject. You know I considered that page in my life as closed for ever ; and I see nothing that would compensate for what it costs me even to think of it. To

redeem my name before the world would be of no avail to me now, for all my English habits are broken, and all that made life valuable to me is gone. If Long and Beauchamp could reject my solemn affirmation three years ago, what would a retraction slowly wrung from them be worth to me now? It might once have been, but that is all over now. Even the desire to take care of you would no longer actuate me since you have Keith again; and in a few years I hope to make my child independent in money matters—Independent of your love and care you would not wish her to be. Forget the troubles of your life, Ermine, and be happy with your faithful Keith, without further efforts on behalf of one whom they only harass and grieve."

Ermine shed some bitter tears over this letter, the more sorrowful because the refusal was a shock to her own reliance on his honour, and she felt like a traitress to his cause. And Colin would give him up after this ungrateful indifference, if nothing worse. Surely it betrayed a consciousness that the whole of his conduct would not bear inquiry, and she thought of the representations that she had so indignantly rejected, that the accounts, even without the last fatal demand, were in a state that it required an excess of charity to ascribe to mere carelessness on the part of the principal.

She was glad that Alison was absent, and Rose in the garden. She laid her head on her little table, and drew long sobs of keen suffering, the reaction from the enjoyment and hope of the last few months. And so little knew she what she ought to ask, that she could only strive to say, "Thy will be done."

"Ermine! my Ermine, this is not a thing to be so much taken to heart. This foolish philosopher has not even read

his letters. I never saw any one more consistently like himself."

Ermine looked up, and Colin was standing over her, muffled up to the eyes, and a letter of his own in his hand. Her first impulse was to cry out against his imprudence, glad as she was to see him. "My cough is nearly gone," he said, unwinding his wrappings, "and I could not stay at home after this wonderful letter—three pages about chemical analysis, which he does me the honour to think I can understand, two of commissions for villainous compounds, and one of protestations that 'I will be drowned; nobody shall help me.'"

Ermine's laugh had come, even amid her tears, his tone was so great a relief to her. She did not know that he had spent some minutes in cooling down his vexation, lest he should speak urgently of her brother's indifference. "Poor Edward," she said, "you don't mean that this is all the reply you have!"

"See for yourself," and he pointed to the divisions of the letter he had described. "There is all he vouchsafes to his own proper affairs. You see he misapprehends the whole; indeed, I don't believe he has even read our letters."

"We often thought he did not attend to all we wrote," said Ermine. "It is very disheartening!"

"Nay, Ermine, *you* disheartened with the end in view!"

"There are certainly the letters about Maddox's committal still to reach him, but who knows if they will have more effect! Oh, Colin, this was such a hope that—perhaps I have dwelt too much upon it!"

"It *is* such a hope," he repeated. "There is no reason for laying it aside, because Edward is his old self."

“ Colin ! you still think so ?”

“ I think so more than ever. If he will not read reason, he must hear it ; and if he takes no notice of the letters we sent after the sessions, I shall go and bring him back in time for the assizes.”

“ Oh, Colin ! it cannot be. Think of the risk ! You who are still looking so thin and ill. I cannot let you.”

“ It will be warm enough by the time I get there.”

“ The distance ! You are doing too much for us.”

“ No, Ermine,” with a smile, “ that I will never do.”

She tried to answer his smile, but leant back and shed tears, not like the first, full of pain, but of affectionate gratitude, and yet of reluctance at his going. She had ever been the strength and stay of the family, but there seemed to be a source of weakness in his nearness, and this period of his indisposition and of suspense had been a strain on her spirits that told in this gentle weeping. “ This is a poor welcome after you have been laid up so long,” she said when she could speak again. “ If I behave so ill, you will only want to run from the sight of me.”

“ It will be July when I come back.” . . .

“ I do not think you ought to go.”

“ Nor I, if Edward deigns to read the account of Rose’s examination.”

In that calm smiling resolution Ermine read the needlessness of present argument, and spoke again of his health and his solitary hours.

“ Mitchel has been very kind in coming to sit with me, and we have indulged in two or three castles in the air—hospitals in the air, perhaps, I should say. I told him

he might bring me down another guest instead of the tailor, and he has brought a poor young pupil teacher, whom Tibbie calls a winsome callant, but I am afraid she won't save him. Did you ever read the 'Lady of La Garaye'?"

"Not the poem, but I know her story."

"As soon as that parcel comes in, which Villars is always expecting, I propose to myself to read that poem with you. What's that? It can't be Rachel as usual."

If it was not Rachel, it was the next thing to her, namely, Alick Keith. This was the last day of those that he had spent at the Homestead, and he was leaving Rachel certainly better. She had not fallen back on any evening that he had been there, but to his great regret he would not be able to come out the next day. Regimental duty would take him up nearly all the day, and then he was invited to a party at the Deanery, "which the mother would never have forgiven me for refusing," he said; just as if the mother's desires had the very same power over him as over her daughters. "I came to make a desperate request, Miss Williams," he said. "Would it be any way possible for you to be so kind as to go up and see Rachel? She comes downstairs now, and there are no steps if you go in by the glass doors. Do you think you could manage it?"

"She wishes it?" said Ermine.

"Very much. There are thorns in her mind that no one knows how to deal with so well as you do, and she told me yesterday how she longed to get to you."

"It is very good in her. I have sometimes feared she might think we had dealt unfairly by her if she did not know how very late in the business we suspected that our impostors were the same," said Ermine.

"It is not her way to blame any one but herself," said Alick, "and, in fact, our showing her the woodcut deception was a preparation for the rest of it. But I have said very little to her about all that matter. She required to be led away rather than back to it. Brooding over it is fatal work, and yet her spirits are too much weakened and shattered to bear over-amusement. That is the reason that I thought you would be so very welcome to-morrow. She has seen no one yet but Lady Temple, and shrinks from the very idea."

"I do not see why I should not manage it very well," said Ermine, cheerfully, "if Miss Curtis will let me know in time whether she is equal to seeing me. You know I can walk into the house now."

Alick thanked her earnestly. His listless manner was greatly enlivened by his anxiety, and Colonel Keith was obliged to own that marriage would be a good thing for him ; but *such* a marriage ! If from sheer indolence he should leave the government to his wife, then—Colin could only shrug his shoulders in dismay.

Nevertheless, when Ermine's wheeled chair came to the door the next afternoon, he came with it, and walked by her side up the hill, talking of what had been absolutely the last call she had made—a visit when they had both been riding with the young Beauchamps.

"Suppose any one had told me then I should make my next visit with you to take care of me, how pleased I should have been," said Ermine, laughing, and taking as usual an invalid's pleasure in all the little novelties only remarked after long seclusion. That steep, winding, pebbly road, with the ferns and creeping plants on its rocky sides, was a wonderful panorama to her, and she entreated for a stop at

the summit to look down on the sea and the town ; but here Grace came out to them full of thanks and hopes, little knowing that to them the event was a very great one. When at the glass doors of the garden entrance, Ermine trusted herself to the Colonel's arm, and between him and her crutch crossed the short space to the morning room, where Rachel rose from her sofa, but wisely did not come forward till her guest was safely placed in a large easy chair.

Rachel then held out her hand to the Colonel, and quietly said, "Thank you," in a subdued manner that really touched him, as he retreated quickly and left them together. Then Rachel sat down on a footstool close to Ermine, and looked up to her. "Oh, it is so good of you to come to me ! I would not have dared to think of it, but I just said I wished to get out for nothing but to go to you ; and then he—Captain Keith—would go and fetch you."

"As the nearest approach to fetching the moon, I suppose," said Ermine, brightly. "It was very kind to me, for I was longing to see you, and I am glad to find you looking better than I expected."

For in truth Rachel's complexion had been little altered by her illness ; and the subdued dejected expression was the chief change visible, except in the feebleness and tremulousness of all her movements. "Yes, I am better," she said. "I ought to be, for he is so good to me."

"Dear Rachel, I was so very glad to hear of this," said Ermine, bending down to kiss her.

"Were you ? I thought no one could be that cared for him," said Rachel.

"I cared more for him the week that you were ill than ever I had done before."

“Grace tells me of that,” said Rachel, “and when he is here I believe it. But, Miss Williams, please look full at me, and tell me whether everybody would not think—I don’t say that I could do it—but if every one would not think it a great escape for him if I gave him up.”

“No one that could really judge.”

“Because, listen,” said Rachel, quickly, “the regiment is going to Scotland, and he and the mother have taken it into their heads that I shall get well faster somewhere away from home. And—and they want to have the wedding as soon as I am better; and they are going to write about settlements and all that. I have never said I would, and I don’t feel as if—as if I ought to let him do it; and if ever the thing is to be stopped at all, this is the only time.”

“But why? You do not wish——”

“Don’t talk of what I wish,” said Rachel. “Talk of what is good for him.”

Ermine was struck with the still resolute determination of judging for herself—the self-sufficiency, almost redeemed by the unselfishness, and the face was most piteously in earnest.

“My dear, surely he can be trusted to judge. He is no boy, in spite of his looks. The Colonel always says that he is as much older than his age in character as he is younger in appearance.”

“I know that,” said Rachel, “but I don’t think he ought to be trusted here; for you see,” and she looked down, “all the blindness of—of his affection is enhanced by his nobleness and generosity, and he has nobody to check or stop him; and it does seem to me a shame for us all to catch at such compassion, and encumber him with me, just because I am marked for scorn and dislike. I can’t get any one to help

me look at it so. My own people would fancy it was only that I did not care for him ; and he—I can't even think about it when he is here, but I get quite distracted with doubts if it can be right whenever he goes away. And you are the only person who can help me ! Bessie wrote very kindly to me, and I asked to see what she said to him. I thought I might guess her feeling from it. And he said he knew I should fancy it worse than it was if he did not let me see. It was droll, and just like her—not unkind ; but I could see it is the property that makes her like it. And his uncle is blind, you know, and could only send a blessing, and kind hopes, and all that. Oh, if I could guess whether that uncle thinks he ought ! What does Colonel Keith think ? I know you will tell me truly.”

“ He thinks,” said Ermine, with a shaken voice, “ that real trustworthy affection outweighs all the world could say.”

“ But he thinks it is a strange, misplaced liking, exaggerated by pity for one sunk so low ? ” said Rachel, in an excited manner.

“ Rachel,” said Ermine, “ you must take my beginning as a pledge of my speaking the whole truth. Colonel Keith is certainly not fond of you personally, and rather wonders at Alick, but he has never doubted that this is the genuine feeling that is for life, and that it is capable of making you both better and happier. Indeed, Rachel, we do both feel that you suit Alick much more than many people who have been far better liked.”

Rachel looked cheered. “ Yet you,” she faltered, “ you have been an instance of resolute withstandings.”

“ I don't think I shall be long,” murmured Ermine, a vivid

colour flashing forth upon her cheek, and leading the question from herself. "Just suppose you *did* carry out this fierce act of self-abnegation, what do you think could come next?"

"I don't know! I would not break down or die if I could help it," added Rachel, faintly after her brave beginning.

"And for him? Do you think being cast off would be so very pleasant to him?"

Rachel hung her head, and her lips made a half murmur of, "Would not it be good for him?"

"No, Rachel, it is the very sorest trial there can be when, even in the course of providence, kind intentions are coldly requited; and it would be incalculably harder when therewith there would be rejection of love."

"Ah! I never said I could do it. I could not tell him I did not care for him, and short of that nothing would stop it," sobbed Rachel, "only I wished to feel it was not very mean—very wrong." She laid her weary head on Ermine's lap, and Ermine bent down and kissed her.

"So happy, so bright and free, and capable, his life seems now," proceeded Rachel. "I can't understand his joining it to mine; and if people shunned and disliked him for my sake!"

"Surely that will depend on yourself. I have never seen you in society, but if you have the fear of making him unpopular or remarkable before your eyes, you will avoid it."

"Oh, yes; I know," said Rachel, impatiently. "I did think I should not have been a commonplace woman," and she shed a few tears.

Ermine was provoked with her, and began to think that she had been arguing on a wrong tack, and that it would be better after all for Alick to be free. Rachel looked up presently. "It must be very odd to you to hear me say so, but I can't help feeling the difference. I used to think it so poor and weak to be in love, or to want any one to take care of one. I thought marriage such ordinary drudgery, and ordinary opinions so contemptible, and had such schemes for myself. And this—and this is such a break down, my blunders and their consequences have been so unspeakably dreadful, and now instead of suffering, dying—as I felt I ought—it has only made me just like other women, for I know I could not live without him, and then all the rest of it must come for his sake."

"And will make you much more really useful and effective than ever you could have been alone," said Ermine.

"He does talk of doing things together, but, oh ! I feel as if I could never dare put out my hand again !"

"Not alone perhaps."

"I like to hear him tell me about the soldiers' children, and what he wants to have done for them."

"You and I little thought what Lady Temple was to bring us," said Ermine, cheerfully, "but you see we are not the strongest creatures in the world, so we must resign ourselves to our fate, and make the best of it. *They* must judge how many imperfections they choose to endure, and we can only make the said drawbacks as little troublesome as may be. Now, I think I see Miss Curtis watching in fear that I am over-talking you."

"Oh, must you go ? You have really comforted me ! I wanted an external opinion very much, and I do trust yours !

Only tell me," she added, holding Ermine's hand, "is this indeed *so* with you?"

"Not yet," said Ermine, softly, "do not speak about it, but I think you will be comforted to hear that this matter of yours, by leading to the matron's confession, may have removed an obstacle that was far more serious in my eyes than even my own helplessness, willing as Colin was to cast both aside. Oh, Rachel, there is a great deal to be thankful for."

Rachel lay down on her sofa, and fell asleep, nor did Alick find any occasion for blaming Grace when he returned the next day. The effect of the conversation had been to bring Rachel to a meek submission, very touching in its passiveness and weary peacefulness. She was growing stronger, walked out leaning on Alick's arm, and was even taken out by him in a boat, a wonderful innovation, for a dangerous accident to Mr. Curtis had given the mother such a horror of the sea that no boating excursions had ever taken place during her solitary reign, and the present were only achieved by a wonderful stretch of dear Alexander's influence. Perhaps she trusted him the more, because his maimed hand prevented him from being himself an oarsman, though he had once been devoted to rowing. At any rate, with an old fisherman at the oar, many hours were spent upon the waters of the bay, in a tranquillity that was balm to the harassed spirit, with very little talking, now and then some reading aloud, but often nothing but a dreamy repose. The novelty and absence of old association was one secret of the benefit that Rachel thus derived. Any bustle or resumption of former habits was a trial to her shattered nerves, and brought back the dreadful haunted nights. The first sight of Conrade,

still looking thin and delicate, quite overset her ; a drive on the Avonchester road renewed all she had felt on the way thither ; three or four morning visitors coming in on her unexpectedly, made the whole morbid sense of eyes staring at her recur all night, and when the London solicitor came down about the settlements, she shrank in such a painful though still submissive way, from the sight of a stranger, far more from the semblance of a dinner party, that the mother yielded, and let her remain in her sitting-room.

“ May I come in ? ” said Alick, knocking at the door.
“ I have something to tell you.”

“ What, Alick ! Not Mr. Williams come ? ”

“ Nothing so good. In fact I doubt if you will think it good at all. I have been consulting this same solicitor about the title-deeds ; that cheese you let fall, you know,” he added, stroking her hand, and speaking so gently that the very irony was rather pleasant.

“ Oh, it is very bad.”

“ Now wouldn’t you like to hear it was so bad that I should have to sell out, and go to the diggings to make it up ? ”

“ Now, Alick, if it were not for your sake, you know should like——”

“ I know you would ; but you see, unfortunately, it was not a cheese at all, only a wooden block that the fox ran away with. Lawyers don’t put people’s title-deeds into such dangerous keeping ; the true cheese is safe locked up in a tin-box in Mr. Martin’s chambers in London.”

“ Then what did I give Mauleverer ? ”

“ A copy kept for reference down here.”

Rachel hid her face.

“There, I knew you would think it no good news, and it is just a thunder-clap to me. All you wanted me for was to defend the mother and make up to the charity, and now there’s no use in me,” he said in a disconsolate tone.

“Oh, Alick, Alick, why am I so foolish ?”

“Never mind ; I took care Martin should not know it. Nobody is aware of the little affair but our two selves ; and I will take care the fox learns the worth of his prize. Only now, Rachel, answer me, is there any use left for me still ?”

“You should not ask me such things, Alick, you know it all too well.”

“Not so well that I don’t want to hear it. But I had more to say. This Martin is a man of very different calibre from old Cox, with a head and heart in London charities and churches, and it had struck him as it did you, that the Homestead had an easier bargain of it than that good namesake of yours had ever contemplated. If it paid treble or quadruple rent, the dear mother would never find it out, nor grow a geranium the less.”

“No, she would not ! But after all, the lace apprenticeships are poor work.”

“So they are, but Martin says there would be very little difficulty in getting a private bill to enable the trustees to apply the sum otherwise for the benefit of the Avonmouth girls.”

“Then if I had written to him, it would have been all right ! Oh, my perverseness !”

“And, Rachel, now that money has been once so intended ; suppose it kept its destination. About £500 would put up a tidy little industrial school, and you might not

object to have a scholarship or two for some of our little —th Highlander lassies whose fathers won't make orphans of them for the regular military charities. What, crying, Rachel! Don't you like it?"

"It is my dream. The very thing I wished and managed so vilely. If Lovedy were alive! Though perhaps that is not the thing to wish. But I can't bear taking your——"

"Hush! You can't do worse than separate your own from mine. This is no part of the means I laid before Mr. Martin by way of proving myself a responsible individual. I took care of that. Part of this is prize-money, and the rest was a legacy that a rich old merchant put me down for in a transport of gratitude because his son was one of the sick in the bungalow where the shell came. I have had it these three or four months, and wondered what to do with it."

"This will be very beautiful, very excellent. And we can give the ground."

"I have thought of another thing. I never heard of an industrial school where the great want was not food for industry. Now I know the Colonel and Mr. Mitchell have some notion floating in their minds about getting a house for convalescents down here, and it strikes me that this might supply the work in cooking, washing, and so on. I think I might try what they thought of it."

Rachel could only weep out her shame and thankfulness; and when Alick reverently added that it was a scheme that would require much thought and much prayer, the pang struck her to the heart—how little she had prayed over the F. U. E. E. The prayer of her life had been for action and

usefulness, but when she had seen the shadow in the stream, her hot and eager haste, her unconscious detachment from all that was not visible and material had made her adhere too literally to that misinterpreted motto, *laborare est orare*. How should then her eyes be clear to discern between substance and shadow?

CHAPTER X.

THE HONEYMOON.

“ Around the very place doth brood
A calm and holy quietude.”—REV. ISAAC WILLIAMS.

THE level beams of a summer sun, ending one of his longest careers, were tipping a mountain peak with an ineffable rosy purple, contrasting with the deep shades of narrow ravines that cleft the rugged sides, and gradually expanded into valleys, sloping with green pasture, or clothed with wood. The whole picture, with its clear, soft sky, was retraced on the waters of the little lake set in emerald meadows, which lay before the eyes of Rachel Keith, as she reclined in a garden chair before the windows of a pretty rustic-looking hotel ; but there was no admiration, no peaceful contemplation on her countenance, only the same weary air of depression, too wistful and startled even to be melancholy repose, and the same bewildered distressed look that had been as it were stamped on her by the gaze of the many unfriendly eyes at the Quarter Sessions, and by her two unfortunate dinner parties.

The wedding was to have been quietness itself, but though the bridegroom had refused to contribute sister, brother-in-law, or even uncle to the numbers, conventionalities had been too strong for Mrs. Curtis, and “ just one more ” had

been added to the guests till a sufficient multitude had been collected to renew all Rachel's morbid sensations of distress and bewilderment with their accompanying feverish symptoms, and she had been only able to proceed on her journey by very short stages, taken late in the day.

Alick had not forgotten her original views as to travelling, and as they were eventually to go to Scotland, had proposed beginning with Dutch reformatories and Swiss cretins; but she was so plainly unfit for extra fatigue and bustle, that the first few weeks were to be spent in Wales, where the enjoyment of fine scenery might, it was hoped, be beneficial to the jaded spirits, and they had been going through a course of passes and glens as thoroughly as Rachel's powers would permit, for any over-fatigue renewed feverishness and its delusive miseries, and the slightest alarm told upon the shattered nerves.

She did not easily give way at the moment, but the shock always took revenge in subsequent suffering, which all Alick's care could not prevent, though the exceeding charm of his tenderness rendered even the indisposition almost precious to her.

“What a lovely sunset!” he said, coming to lean over the back of her chair. “Have you been watching it?”

“I don't know.”

“Are you very much tired?”

“No, it is very quiet here.”

“Very; but I must take you in before that curling mist mounts into your throat.”

“This is a very nice place, Alick, the only really quiet one we have found.”

“I am afraid that it will be so no longer. The landlord

tells me he has letters from three parties to order rooms."

"Oh, then, pray let us go on," said Rachel, looking alarmed.

"To-morrow afternoon then, for I find there's another waterfall."

"Very well," said Rachel, resignedly.

"Or shall we cut the waterfall, and get on to Llan—something?"

"If you don't think we ought to see it."

"Ought?" he said, smiling. "What is the ought in the case? Why are we going through all this? Is it a duty to society or to ourselves?"

"A little of both, I suppose," said Rachel.

"And, Rachel, from the bottom of your heart, is it not a trying duty?"

"I want to like what you are showing me," said Rachel.

"And you are more worried than delighted, eh?"

"I—I don't know! I see it is grand and beautiful! I did love my own moors, and the Spinsters' Needles, but—Don't think me very ungrateful, but I can't enter into all this! All I really do care for is your kindness, and helping me about," and she was really crying like a child unable to learn a lesson.

"Well," he said, with his own languor of acquiescence, "we are perfectly agreed. Waterfalls are an uncommon bore, if one is not in a concatenation accordingly."

Rachel was beguiled into a smile.

"Come," he said, "let us be strong minded! If life should ever become painful to us because of our neglect of the waterfalls, we will set out and fulfil our tale of them.

Meantime, let me take you where you shall be really quiet, home to Bishopsworthy."

"But your uncle does not expect you so soon."

"My uncle is always ready for me, and a week or two of real rest there would make you ready for the further journey."

Rachel made no opposition. She was glad to have her mind relieved from the waterfalls, but she had rather have been quite alone with her husband. She knew that Lord and Lady Keith had taken a house at Littleworthy, while Gowanbrae was under repair, and she dreaded the return to the bewildering world, before even the first month was over ; but Alick made the proposal so eagerly that she could not help assenting with all the cordiality she could muster, thinking that it must be a wretched, disappointing wedding tour for him, and she would at least not prevent his being happy with his uncle ; as happy as he could be with a person tied to him, of whom all his kindred must disapprove, and especially that paragon of an uncle, whom she heard of like an intensification of all that class of clergy who had of late been most alien to her.

Alick did not press for her real wishes, but wrote his letter, and followed it as fast as she could bear to travel. So when the train, a succession of ovens for living bodies disguised in dust, drew up at the Littleworthy Station, there was a ready response to the smart footman's inquiry, "Captain and Mrs. Keith ?" This personage by no means accorded with Rachel's preconceived notions of the Rectory establishment, but she next heard the peculiar clatter by which a grand equipage announces its importance, and saw the coronetted blinkers tossing on the other side of

the railing. A kind little note of welcome was put into Rachel's hand as she was seated in the luxurious open carriage, and Alick had never felt better pleased with his sister than when he found his wife thus spared the closeness of the cramping fly, or the dusty old rectory phaeton. Hospitality is never more welcome than at the station, and Bessie's letter was complacently accepted. Rachel would, she knew, be too much tired to see her on that day, and on the next she much regretted having an engagement in London, but on the Sunday they would not fail to meet, and she begged that Rachel would send word by the servant what time Meg should be sent to the Rectory for her to ride; it would be a kindness to exercise her, for it was long since she had been used.

Rachel could not help colouring with pleasure at the notion of riding her own Meg again, and Alick freely owned that it was well thought of. He already had a horse at his uncle's, and was delighted to see Rachel at last looking forward to something. But as she lay back in the carriage, revelling in the fresh wind, she became dismayed at the succession of cottages of gentility, with lawns and hedges of various pretensions.

“There must be a terrible number of people here!”

“This is only Littleworthy.”

“Not very little.”

“No; I told you it was villafied and cockneyfied. There,” as the horses tried to stop at a lodge leading to a prettily built house, “that's Timber End, the crack place here, where Bessie has always said it was her ambition to live.”

“How far is it from the Parsonage?”

“Four miles.”

Which was a comfort to Rachel, not that she wished to be distant from Bessie, but the population appalled her imagination.

“Bishopsworthy is happily defended by a Dukery,” explained Alick, as coming to the end of the villas they passed woods and fields, a bit of heathy common, and a scattering of cottages. Labourers going home from work looked up, and as their eyes met Alick’s there was a mutual smile and touch of the hat. He evidently felt himself coming home. The trees of a park were beginning to rise in front, when the carriage turned suddenly down a sharp steep hill ; the right side of the road bounded by a park paling ; the left, by cottages, reached by picturesque flights of brick stairs, then came a garden wall, and a halt. Alick called out, “Thanks,” and we will get out here,” adding, “They will take in the goods the back way. I don’t like careering into the churchyard.”

Rachel, alighting, saw that the lane proceeded downwards to a river crossed by a wooden bridge, with an expanse of meadows beyond. To her left was a stable-yard, and below it a white gate and white railings enclosing a graveyard, with a very beautiful church standing behind a mushroom yew tree. The upper boundary of the churchyard was the clipped yew hedge of the rectory garden, whose front entrance was through the churchyard. There was a lovely cool tranquillity of aspect as the shadows lay sleeping on the grass ; and Rachel could have stood and gazed, but Alick opened the gate, and there was a movement at the seat that enclosed the gnarled trunk of the yew tree. A couple of village lads touched their caps and departed the opposite way ; a white setter dog bounded forward, and, closely attended by a still

snowier cat, a gentleman came to meet them, so fearlessly treading the pathway between the graves, and so youthful in figure, that it was only the “Well, uncle, here she is,” and, “Alick, my dear boy,” that convinced her that this was indeed Mr. Clare. The next moment he had taken her hand, kissed her brow, and spoken a few words of fatherly blessing, then, while Alick exchanged greetings with the cat and dog, he led her to the arched yew tree entrance to his garden, up two stone steps, along a flagged path across the narrow grass-plat in front of the old two-storied house, with a tiled verandah like an eyebrow to the lower front windows.

Instead of entering by the door in the centre, he turned the corner of the house, where the eastern gable disclosed a window opening on a sloping lawn full of bright flower-beds. The room within was lined with books and stored with signs of parish work, but with a refined orderliness reigning over the various little ornaments, and almost betokening feminine habitation ; and Alick exclaimed with admiration of a large bowl of fresh roses, beautifully arranged.

“Traces of Bessie,” said Mr. Clare ; “she brought them this morning, and spent nearly an hour in arranging them and entertaining me with her bright talk. I have hardly been able to keep out of the room since, they make it so delicious.”

“Do you often see her ?” asked Alick.

“Yes ; dear child, she is most good-natured and attentive, and I take it most kindly of her, so courted as she is.”

“How do you get on with his lordship ?”

“I don’t come much in his way ; he has been a good deal laid up with sciatica, but he seems very fond of her ; and it was all her doing that they have been all this time at Little-

worthy, instead of being in town for the season. She thought it better for him."

"And where is Mr. Lifford?" asked Alick.

"Gone to M—— till Saturday."

"Unable to face the bride."

"I fear Ranger is not equally shy," said Mr. Clare, understanding a certain rustle and snort to import that the dog was pressing his chin hard upon Rachel's knee, while she declared her content with the handsome creature's black depth of eye; and the cat executed a promenade of tenderness upon Alick.

"How are the peacocks, Alick?" added Mr. Clare; "they, at least, are inoffensive pets. I dreaded the shears without your superintendence, but Joe insisted that they were getting lop-sided."

Alick put his head out at the window. "All right, sir; Joe has been a little hard on the crest of the left-hand one, but it is recovering."

Whereupon, Rachel discovered that the peacocks were creatures of yew tree, perched at either end of the garden fence. Mr. Clare had found them there, and preserved them with solicitous fidelity.

Nothing could be less like than he was to the grave, thin, stooping ascetic in a long coat, that she had expected. He was a tall, well-made man, of the same youthful cast of figure as his nephew, and a far lighter and more springy step, with features and colouring recalling those of his niece, as did the bright sunny playful sweetness of his manner; his dark handsome eyes only betraying their want of sight by a certain glassy immobility that contrasted with the play of the expressive mouth. It was hard to guess why Bessie should

have shunned such an uncle. Alick took Rachel to the bedroom above the library, and, like it, with two windows—one overlooking churchyard, river, and hay-fields, the other commanding, over the peacock hedge, a view of the playground, where Mr. Clare was seen surrounded by boys, appealing to him on some disputed matter of cricket. There was a wonderful sense of serenity, freshness, and fragrance, inexpressibly grateful to Rachel's wearied feelings, and far more comfortable than the fine scenery through which she had been carried, because no effort to look and admire was incumbent on her—nay, not even an effort to talk all the evening. Mr. Clare seemed to have perfectly imbibed the idea that rest was what she wanted, and did not try to make small talk with her, though she sat listening with pleased interest to the conversation between him and his nephew—so home like, so full of perfect understanding of one another.

“Is there anything to be read aloud?” presently asked Alick.

“You have not by chance got ‘Framley Parsonage?’”

“I wish I had. I did pick up ‘Silas Marner,’ at a station, thinking you might like it;” and he glanced at Rachel, who had, he suspected, thought his purchase an act of weakness. “Have you met with it?”

“I have met with nothing of the sort since you were here last;” then turning to Rachel, “Alick indulges me with novels, for my good curate had rather read the catalogue of a sale any day than meddle with one, and I can’t set on my pupil teacher in a book where I don’t know what is coming.”

“We will get ‘Framley,’ ” said Alick.

“Bessie has it. She read me a very clever scene about a weak young parson bent on pleasing himself; and offered to

lend me the book, but I thought it would not edify Will Walker. But, no doubt, you have read it long ago."

"No," said Rachel ; and something withheld her from disclaiming such empty employments. Indeed, she was presently much interested in the admirable portraiture of "Silas Marner," and still more by the keen, vivid enjoyment, critical, droll, and moralizing, displayed by a man who heard works of fiction so rarely that they were always fresh to him, and who looked on them as studies of life. His hands were busy all the time carving a boss for the roof of one of the side aisles of his church—the last step in its gradual restoration.

That night there was no excitement of nerve, no morbid fancy to trouble Rachel's slumbers ; she only awoke as the eight o'clock bell sounded through the open window, and for the first time for months rose less weary than she had gone to rest. Week-day though it were, the description "sweet day, so calm, so cool, so bright," constantly recurred to her mind as she watched the quiet course of occupation. Alick, after escorting his uncle to a cottage, found her searching among the stores in the music stand.

"You unmusical female," he said, "what is that for!"

"Your uncle spoke of music last night, and I thought he would like it."

"I thought you had no such propensity."

"I learnt like other people, but it was the only thing I could not do as well as Grace, and I thought it wasted time, and was a young ladyism ; but if I can recover music enough to please him, I should be glad."

"Thank you," said Alick, earnestly. "He is very much pleased with your voice in speaking. Indeed, I believe I first heard it with his ears."

“This is a thorough lady’s collection of music,” said Rachel, looking through it to hide her blush of pleasure. “Altogether the house has not a bachelor look.”

“Did you not know that he had been married? It was when he first had the living twelve years ago. She was a very lovely young thing, half Irish, and this was the happiest place in the world for two years, till her little brother was sent home here from school without proper warning of a fever that had begun there. We all had it, but she and her baby were the only ones that did not recover! There they lie, under the yew-tree, where my uncle likes to teach the children. He was terribly struck down for years, though he went manfully to his work, and it has been remarkable how his spirits and sociability have returned since he lost his sight; indeed, he is more consistently bright than ever he was.”

“I never saw any one like him,” said Rachel. “I have fallen in with clergy that some call holy, and with some that others call pious, but he is not a bit like either. He is not even grave, yet there is a calming, refreshing sense of reverence towards him that would be awe, only it is so happy.”

Alick’s response was to bend over her, and kiss her brow. She had never seen him so much gratified.

“What a comfort your long stay with him must have been,” she said presently, “in the beginning of his blindness!”

“I hope so. It was an ineffable comfort to me to come here out of Littleworthy croquet, and I think cheering me did him good. Rachel, you may do and say what you please,” he added, earnestly, “since you have taken to him.”

“I could not help it,” said Rachel, though a slight

embarrassment came over her at the recollection of Bessie, and at the thought of the narrow views on which she expected to differ. Then, as Alick continued to search among the music, she asked, "Will he like the piano to be used?"

"Of all things. Bessie's singing is his delight. Look, could we get this up?"

"You don't sing, Alick! I mean, do you?"

"We need not betray our talents to worldlings base."

Rachel found her accompaniment the least satisfactory part of the affair, and resolved on an hour's practice every day in Mr. Clare's absence, a wholesome purpose even as regarded her health and spirits. She had just sat down to write letters, feeling for the first time as if they would not be a toil, when Mr. Clare looked in to ask Alick to refer to a verse in the Psalms, quoting it in Greek as well as English, and after the research had been carried to the Hebrew, he told Rachel that he was going to write his sermon, and repaired to the peacock path, where he paced along with Ranger and the cat, in faithful, unobtrusive attendance.

"What, you can read Hebrew, Alick?"

"So can you."

"Enough to appreciate the disputed passages. When did you study it?"

"I learnt enough, when I was laid up, to look out my uncle's texts for him."

She felt a little abashed by the tone, but a message called him away, and before his return Mr. Clare came back to ask for a reference to St. Augustine. On her offer of her services, she was thanked, and directed with great precision to the right volume of the Library of the Fathers; but spying a real St. Augustine, she could not be satisfied without a flight at

the original. It was not, however, easy to find the place ; she was forced to account for her delay by confessing her attempt, and then to profit by Mr. Clare's directions ; and, after all, her false quantities, though most tenderly and apologetically corrected, must have been dreadful to the scholarly ear, for she was obliged to get Alick to read the passage over to him before he arrived at the sense, and Rachel felt her flight of clever womanhood had fallen short. It was quite new to her to be living with people who knew more of, and went deeper into, everything than she did, and her husband's powers especially amazed her.

The afternoon was chiefly spent in the hay-field under a willow-tree ; Mr. Clare tried to leave the young people to themselves, but they would not consent ; and, after a good deal of desultory talk and description of the minnows and water-spiders, in whom Mr. Clare seemed to take a deep interest, they went on with their book till the horses came, and Alick took Rachel for a ride in Earlsworthy Park, a private gate of which, just opposite to the Rectory, was free to its inhabitants. The Duke was an old college friend of Mr. Clare, and though much out of health, and hardly ever able to reside at the Park, all its advantages were at the Rector's service, and they were much appreciated when, on this sultry summer's day, Rachel found shade and coolness in the deep arcades of the beech woods, and freshness on the upland lawns, as she rode happily on the dear old mare, by whom she really thought herself fondly recognised. There was something in the stillness of the whole, even in the absence of the roll andplash of the sea waves beside which she had grown up, that seemed to give her repose from the hurry and throb of sensations and thoughts that had so long preyed

upon her ; and when the ride was over she was refreshed, not tired, and the evening bell drew her to the conclusion most befitting a day spent in that atmosphere of quietude. She felt grateful to her husband for making no remark, though the only time she had been within a church since her illness had been at their wedding ; he only gave her his arm, and said she should sit in the nook that used to be his in the time of his lameness ; and a most sheltered nook it was, between a pillar and the open chancel screen, where no eyes could haunt her, even if the congregation had been more than a Saturday summer evening one.

She only saw the pure, clear, delicately-toned hues of the east window, and the reverent richness of the chancel, and she heard the blind pastor's deep musical voice, full of that expressive power always enhanced by the absence of a book. He led the Psalms with perfect security and a calm fervour that rendered the whole familiar service like something new and touching ; the Lessons were read by Alick, and Rachel, though under any other circumstances she would have been startled to see him standing behind the Eagle, could not but feel all appropriate, and went along with each word as he read it in a tone well worthy of his uncle's scholar. Whether few or many were present, Rachel knew not, thought not ; she was only sensible of the fulness of calm joy that made the Thanksgiving touch her heart and fill her eyes with unbidden tears, that came far more readily than of old.

“ Yet this can't be all,” she said to herself, as she wandered among the tall white lilies in the twilight ; “ is it a trance, or am I myself ? I have not unthought or unfelt, yet I seem falling into a very sweet hypocrisy ! Alick says thought will come back with strength. I don't think I wish it ! ”

The curate did not return till after she had gone to bed, and in the morning he proved to be indeed a very dry and serious middle-aged man, extremely silent, and so grave that there was no knowing how much to allow for shyness. He looked much worn and had a wearied voice, and Mr. Clare and Alick were contriving all they could to give him the rest which he refused, Mr. Clare insisting on taking all the service that could be performed without eyes, and Alick volunteering school-work. This Rachel was not yet able to undertake, nor would Alick even let her go to church in the morning ; but the shady garden, and the echoes of the Amens, and sweet, clear tones of singing, seemed to lull her on in this same gentle, unthinking state of dreamy rest ; and thence, too, in the after part of the day, she could watch the rector, with his Sunday class, on his favourite seat under the yew-tree, close to the cross that marked the resting-place of his wife and child.

She went to church in the evening, sheltered from curious eyes in her nook, and there for a moment she heard the peculiar brush and sweep of rich silk upon pavement, and wondered at so sophisticated a sound in the little homely congregation, but forgot it again in the exulting, joyous beauty of the chants and hymns, led by the rector himself, and, oh, how different from poor Mr. Touchett's best efforts ! and forgot it still more in the unfettered eloquence of the preaching of a man of great natural power, and entirely accustomed to trust to his own inward stores. Like Ermine Williams, she could have said that this preaching was the first that won her attention. It certainly was the first that swept away all her spirit of criticising, and left her touched and impressed, not judging. On what north country folk call the loosing of the kirk, she, moving outwards after the throng, found her-

self close behind a gauzy white cloak over a lilac silk, that filled the whole breadth of the central aisle, and by the dark curl descending beneath the tiny white bonnet, as well as by the turn of the graceful head, she knew her sister-in-law, Lady Keith, of Gowanbrae. In the porch she was met with outstretched hands and eager greetings—

“At last! Where did you hide yourself? I had begun to imagine dire mischances.”

“Only in the corner by the chancel.”

“Alick’s old nook! Keeping up honeymoon privileges! I have kept your secret faithfully. No one knows you are not on the top of Snowdon, or you would have had all the world to call on you.”

“There are always the Earlsworthy woods,” said Alick.

“Or better still, come to Timber End. No one penetrates to my morning room,” laughed Bessie. “Now, Uncle George,” she said, as the rector appeared, “you have had a full allowance of them for three days; you must spare them to me to-morrow morning.”

“So it is you, my lady,” he answered, with a pleased smile; “I heard a sort of hail-storm of dignity sailing in! How is Lord Keith?”

“Very stiff. I want him to have advice, but he hates doctors. What is the last Avonmouth news? Is Ermine in good heart, and the boys well again?”

She was the same Bessie as ever—full of exulting animation, joined to a caressing manner that her uncle evidently delighted in; and to Rachel she was most kind and sisterly, welcoming her so as amply to please and gratify Alick. An arrangement was made that Rachel should be sent for early to spend the day at Timber End, and that Mr. Clare and Alick

should walk over later. Then the two pretty ponies came with her little low carriage to the yew-tree gate, were felt and admired by Mr. Clare, and approved by Alick ; and she drove off gaily, leaving all pleased and amused, but still there was a sense that the perfect serenity had been ruffled.

“Rachel,” said Alick, as they wandered in the twilight garden, “I wonder if you would be greatly disappointed if our travels ended here.”

“I am only too glad of the quiet.”

“Because Lifford is in great need of thorough rest. He has not been away for more than a year, and now he is getting quite knocked up. All he does care to do, is to take lodgings near his wife’s asylum, poor man, and see her occasionally : sad work, but it is rest, and winds him up again ; and there is no one but myself to whom he likes to leave my uncle. Strangers always do too little or too much ; and there is a young man at Littleworthy for the long vacation who can help on a Sunday.”

“Oh, pray let us stay as long as we can !”

“Giving up the Crétins ?”

“It is no sacrifice. I am thankful not to be hunted about ; and if anything could make me better pleased to be here, it would be feeling that I was not hindering you.”

“Then I will hunt him away for six weeks or two months at least. It will be a great relief to my uncle’s mind.”

It was so great a relief that Mr. Clare could hardly bring himself to accept the sacrifice of the honeymoon, and though there could be little doubt which way the discussion would end, he had not yielded when the ponies bore off Rachel on Monday morning.

Timber End was certainly a delightful place. Alick had

called it a cockney villa, but it was in good taste, and very fair and sweet with flowers and shade. Bessie's own rooms, where she made Rachel charmingly at home, were wonderful in choiceness and elegance, exciting Rachel's surprise how it could be possible to be so sumptuously lodged in such a temporary abode, for the house was only hired for a few months, while Gowranbrae was under repair. It was within such easy reach of London that Bessie had been able from thence to go through the more needful season gaieties; and she had thought it wise, both for herself and Lord Keith, not to enter on their full course. It sounded very moderate and prudent, and Rachel felt vexed with herself and Alick for recollecting a certain hint of his, that Lady Keith felt herself more of a star in her own old neighbourhood than she could be in London, and wisely abstained from a full flight till she had tried her wings. It was much pleasanter to go along with Bessie's many far better and more affectionate reasons for prudence, and her minutely personal confidences about her habits, hopes, and fears, given with a strong sense of her own importance and consideration, yet with a warm sisterly tone that made them tokens of adoption, and with an arch drollery that invested them with a sort of grace. The number of engagements that she mentioned in town and country did indeed seem inconsistent with the prudence she spoke of with regard to her own health, or with her attention to that of her husband; but it appeared that all were quite necessary and according to his wishes, and the London ones were usually for the sake of trying to detach his daughter, Mrs. Comyn Menteith, from the extravagant set among whom she had fallen. Bessie was excessively diverting in her accounts of her relations with this scatter-brained step-daughter of hers, and altogether

showed in the most flattering manner how much more thoroughly she felt herself belonging to her brother's wife. If she had ever been amazed or annoyed at Alick's choice, she had long ago surmounted the feeling, or put it out of sight, and she judiciously managed to leap over all that had passed since the beginning of the intimacy that had arisen at the station door at Avonchester. It was very flattering, and would have been perfectly delightful, if Rachel had not found herself wearying for Alick, and wondering whether at the end of seven months she should be as contented as Bessie seemed, to know her husband to be in the sitting-room without one sight of him.

At luncheon, however, when Lord Keith appeared, nothing could be prettier than his wife's manner to him—bright, sweet, and with a touch of graceful deference, at which he always smiled and showed himself pleased ; but Rachel thought him looking much older than in the autumn—he had little appetite, stooped a good deal, and evidently moved with pain. He would not go out of doors, and Bessie, after following him to the library, and spending a quarter of an hour in ministering to his comfort, took Rachel to sit by a cool dancing fountain in the garden, and began with some solicitude to consult her whether he could be really suffering from sciatica, or, as she had lately begun to suspect, from the effects of a blow from the end of a scaffold-pole that had been run against him when taking her through a crowded street. Rachel spoke of advice.

“ What you, Rachel ! you who despised allopathy ! ”

“ I have learnt not to despise advice.”

And Bessie would not trench on Rachel's experiences.

“ There's some old Scotch doctor to whom his faith is

given, and that I don't half believe in. If he would see our own Mr. Harvey here it would be quite another thing ; but it is of no use telling him that Alick would never have had an available knee but for Mr. Harvey's management. He persists in leaving me to my personal trust in him, but for himself he won't see him at any price ! Have you seen Mr. Harvey ? ”

“ I have seen no one.”

“ Oh, I forgot, you are not arrived yet ; but——”

“ There's some one,” exclaimed Rachel, nervously ; and in fact a young man was sauntering towards them. Bessie rose with a sort of annoyance, and “ Never mind, my dear, he is quite inoffensive, we'll soon get rid of him.” Then, as he greeted her with “ Good morning, Lady Keith, I thought I should find you here,” she quickly replied,

“ If you had been proper behaved and gone to the door, you would have known that I am not at home.”

He smiled, and came nearer.

“ No, I am not at home, and, what is more, I do not mean to be. My uncle will be here directly,” she added, in a fee-faw-fum tone.

“ Then it is not true that your brother and his bride are arrived ? ”

“ True in the same sense as that I am at home. There she is, you see—only you are not to see her on any account,” as a bow necessarily passed between him and Rachel. “ Now mind you have *not* been introduced to Mrs. Keith, and if you utter a breath that will bring the profane crowd in shoals upon the Rectory, I shall never forgive you.”

“ Then I am afraid we must not hope to see you at the bazaar for the idiots.”

“No, indeed,” Bessie answered, respecting Rachel’s gesture of refusal ; “no one is to infringe her *incog.* under penalty of never coming here again.”

“You are going ?” he added to Bessie ; “indeed, that was what brought me here. My sisters sent me to ask whether they may shelter themselves under your matronly protection, for my mother dreads the crush.”

“I suppose, as they put my name down, that I must go ; but you know I had much rather give the money outright. It is a farce to call a bazaar charity.”

“Call it what you will, it is one device for a little sensation.”

Rachel’s only sensation at that moment was satisfaction at the sudden appearance of Ranger’s white head, the sure harbinger of his master and Alick, and she sprang up to meet them in the shrubbery path—all her morbid shyness at the sight of a fresh face passing away when her hand was within Alick’s arm. When they came forth upon the lawn, Alick’s brow darkened for a moment, and there was a formal exchange of greetings as the guest retreated.

“I am so sorry,” began Bessie at once ; “I had taken precautions against invasion, but he did not go to the front door. I do so hope Rachel has not been fluttered.”

“I thought he was at Rio,” said Alick.

“He could not stand the climate, and was sent home about a month ago—a regular case of bad shilling, I am afraid, poor fellow ! I am so sorry he came to startle Rachel, but I swore him over to secrecy. He is not to mention to any living creature that she is nearer than Plinlimmon till the *incog.* is laid aside ! I know how to stand up for bridal

privileges, and not to abuse the confidence placed in me."

Any one who was up to the game might have perceived that the sister was trying to attribute all the brother's tone of disapprobation to his anxiety lest his wife should have been startled, while both knew as well as possible that there was a deeper ground of annoyance which was implied in Alick's answer.

"He seems extremely tame about the garden."

"Or he would not have fallen on Rachel. It was only a chance ; he just brought over a message about that tiresome bazaar that has been dinned into our ears for the last three months. A bazaar for idiots they may well call it ! They wanted a carving of yours, Uncle George ! "

"I am afraid I gave little Alice Bertie one in a weak moment, Bessie," said Mr. Clare, "but I hardly durst show my face to Lifford afterwards."

"After all, it is better than some bazaars," said Bessie ; "it is only for the idiot asylum, and I could not well refuse my name and countenance to my old neighbours, though I stood out against taking a stall. Lord Keith would not have liked it."

"Will he be able to go with you ?" asked Alick.

"Oh, no ; it would be an intolerable bore, and his Scottish thrift would never stand the sight of people making such very bad bargains ! No, I am going to take the Carleton girls in, they are very accommodating, and I can get away whenever I please. I am much too forbearing to ask any of you to go with me, though I believe Uncle George is pining to go and see after his carving."

"No, thank you ; after what I heard of the last bazaar I

made up my mind that they are no places for an old parson, nor for his carvings either, so you are quite welcome to fall on me for my inconsistency."

"Not now, when you have a holiday from Mr. Lifford," returned Bessie. "Now come and smell the roses."

All the rest of the day Alick relapsed into the lazy frivolous young officer with whom Rachel had first been acquainted.

As he was driving home in the cool fresh summer night, he began—

"I think I must go to this idiotical bazaar!"

"You!" exclaimed Rachel.

"Yes; I don't think Bessie ought to go by herself with all this Carleton crew."

"You don't wish me to go," said Rachel, gulping down the effort.

"You? My dear Rachel, I would not take you for fifty pounds, nor could I go myself without leaving you as vice deputy curate."

"No need for that," said Mr. Clare, from the seat behind; "young people must not talk secrets with a blind man's ears behind them."

"I make no secret," said Alick. "I could not go without leaving my wife to take care of my uncle, or my uncle to take care of my wife."

"And you think you ought to go?" said Mr. Clare. "It is certainly better that Bessie should have a gentleman with her in the crowd; but you know this is a gossiping neighbourhood, and you must be prepared for amazement at your coming into public alone not three weeks after your wedding."

"I can't help it; she can't go, and I must."

“And you will bring down all the morning visitors that you talk of dreading.”

“We will leave you to amuse them, sir. Much better that” he added between his teeth, “than to leave the very semblance of a secret trusted by her to that intolerable puppy——”

Rachel said no more, but when she was gone upstairs Mr. Clare detained his nephew to say, “I beg your pardon, Alick, but you should be quite sure that your wife likes this proposal.”

“That’s the value of a strong-minded wife, sir,” returned Alick; “she is not given to making a fuss about small matters.”

“Most ladies might not think this a small matter.”

“That is because they have no perspective in their brains. Rachel understands me a great deal too well to make me explain what is better unspoken.”

“You know what I think, Alick, that you are the strictest judge that ever a merry girl had.”

“I had rather you continued to think so, uncle; I should like to think so myself. Good night.”

Alick was right, but whether or not Rachel entered into his motives, she made no objection to his going to the bazaar with his sister, being absolutely certain that he would not have done so if he could have helped it.

Nor was her day at all dreary; Mr. Clare was most kind and attentive to her, without being oppressive, and she knew she was useful to him. She was indeed so full of admiration and reverence for him, that once or twice it crossed her whether she were not belying another of her principles by lapsing into Curatocult, but the idea passed away with scorn at the notion of comparing Mr. Clare with the objects of

such devotion. He belonged to that generation which gave its choicest in intellectual, as well as in religious gifts to the ministry, when a fresh tide of enthusiasm was impelling men forward to build up, instead of breaking down, before disappointment and suspicion had thinned the ranks, and hurled back many a recruit, or doctrinal carpings had taught men to dread a search into their own tenets. He was a highly cultivated, large-minded man, and the conversation between him and his nephew was a constant novelty to her, who had always yearned after depth and thought, and seldom met with them. Still here she was constantly feeling how shallow were her acquirements, how inaccurate her knowledge, how devoid of force and solidity her reasonings compared with what here seemed to be old, well-beaten ground. Nay, the very sparkle of fun and merriment surprised and puzzled her; and all the courtesy of the one gentleman, and the affection of the other, could not prevent her sometimes feeling herself the dullest and most ignorant person present. And yet the sense was never mortifying except when here and there a spark of the old conceit had lighted itself, and lured her into pretensions where she thought herself proficient. She was becoming more and more helpful to Mr. Clare, and his gratitude for her services made them most agreeable, nor did that atmosphere of peace and sincerity that reigned round the Rectory lose its charm. She was really happy all through the solitary Wednesday, and much more contented with the results than was Alick. "A sickening place," he said, "I am glad I went."

"How glad Bessie must have been to have you!"

"I believe she was. She has too much good taste for much of what went on there."

“I doubt,” said Mr. Clare, laughing, “if you could have been an agreeable acquisition.”

“I don’t know. Bessie fools one into thinking oneself always doing her a favour. Oh, Rachel, I am thankful you have never taken to being agreeable.”

CHAPTER XI.

THE HUNTSFORD CROQUET.

“Une femme égoïste, non seulement de cœur, mais d'esprit, ne peut pas sortir d'elle-même. Le moi est indélibile chez elle. Une véritable égoïste ne sait même pas être fausse.”—MME. E. DE GIRARDIN.

“I AM come to prepare you,” said Lady Keith, putting her arm into her brother's, and leading him into the peacock path. “Mrs. Huntsford is on her way to call and make a dead set to get you all to a garden party.”

“Then we are off to the Earlswothy Woods.”

“Nay, listen, Alick. I have let you alone and defended you for a whole month, but if you persist in shutting up your wife, people won't stand it.”

“Which of us is the Mahometan?”

“You are pitied! But you see it was a strong thing our appearing without our several incumbrances, and though an old married woman like me may do as she pleases, yet for a bridegroom of not three weeks' standing to resort to bazaars *solus* argues some weighty cause.”

“And argues rightly.”

“Then you are content to be supposed to have an unproduceably eccentric melancholy bride?”

“Better they should think so than that she should be so. She has been victimized enough already to her mother's desire to save appearances.”

“ You do not half believe me, Alick, and this is really a very kind, thoughtful arrangement of Mrs. Huntsford’s. She consulted me, saying there were such odd stories about you two that she was most anxious that Rachel should appear and confute them ; and she thought that an out-of-door party like this would suit best, because it would be early, and Rachel could get away if she found it too much for her.”

“ After being walked out to satisfy a curious neighbourhood.”

“ Now Alick, do consider it. This sort of thing could remind her of nothing painful ; Uncle George would enjoy it.”

“ And fall over the croquet traps.”

“ No ; if you wanted to attend to him, I could take care of Rachel.”

“ I cannot tell, Bessie ; I believe it is pure goodnature on Mrs. Huntsford’s part ; but if we go, it must be from Rachel’s spontaneous movement. I will not press her on any account. I had rather the world said she was crazy at once than expose her to the risk of one of the dreadful nights that haunted us till we came here to perfect quiet.”

“ But she is well now. She looks better and nicer than I ever saw her. Really, Alick, now her face is softer, and her eyes more veiled, and her chin not cocked up, I am quite proud of her. Every one will be struck with her good looks.”

“ Flattery, Bessie,” he said, not ill pleased. “ Yes, she is much better, and more like herself ; but I dread all this being overthrown. If she wishes herself to go, it may be a good beginning, but she must not be persuaded.”

“ Then I must not even tell her that she won’t be

required to croquet, and that I'll guard her from all civil speeches."

"No ; for indeed, Bessie, on your own account and Lord Keith's, you should hardly spend a long afternoon from home."

"Here's the war in the enemy's quarters ! As to fatigue, dawdling about Mrs. Huntsford's garden is much the same as dawdling about my own, and makes me far more entertaining."

"I cannot help thinking, Bessie, that Lord Keith is more ill than you suppose. I am sure he is in constant pain."

"So I fear," said Bessie, gravely ; "but what can be done ? He will see no one but his old surgeon in Edinburgh."

"Then take him there."

"Take him ? You must know what it is to be in the hands of a clever woman before you make such a proposal."

"You are a cleverer woman than my wife in bringing about what you really wish."

"Just consider, Alick, our own house is uninhabitable, and this one on our hands—my aunt coming to me in a month's time. You don't ask me to do what is reasonable."

"I cannot tell, Bessie. You can be the only judge of what is regard of the right kind for your husband's health or for yourself ; and see, there is Mrs. Huntsford actually arrived, and talking to my uncle."

"One moment, Alick : I am not going to insult myself so far as to suppose that poor Charlie Carleton's being at home has anything to do with your desire to deport me, but I want you to know that he did not come home till after we were settled here."

"I do not wish to enter into details, Bessie," and he

crossed the lawn towards the window where Mr. Clare and Rachel had just received Mrs. Huntsford, a goodnatured joyous-looking lady, a favourite with every one. Her invitation was dexterously given to meet a few friends at luncheon, and in the garden, where the guests would be free to come and go ; there might perhaps be a little dancing later, she had secured some good music which would, she knew, attract Mr. Clare, and she hoped he would bring Captain and Mrs. Keith. She knew Mrs. Keith had not been well, but she promised her a quiet room to rest in, and she wanted to show her a view of the Devon coast done by a notable artist in water-colours. Rachel readily accepted—in fact, this quiet month had been so full of restoration that she had almost forgotten her morbid shrinking from visitors ; and Bessie infused into her praise and congratulations a hint that a refusal would have been much against Alick's reputation, so that she resolved to keep up to the mark, even though he took care that she should know that she might yet retract.

" You did not wish me to refuse, Alick," said she, struck by his grave countenance, when she found him lying on the slope of the lawn shortly after, in deep thought.

" No, not at all," he replied ; " it is likely to be a pleasant affair, and my uncle will be delighted to have us with him. No," he added, seeing that she still looked at him inquisitively, " it is the old story. My sister ! Poor little thing ! I always feel as though I were more unkind and unjust to her than any one else, and yet we are never together without my feeling as if she was deceiving herself and me ; and yet it is all so fair and well reasoned that one is always left in the wrong. I regretted this marriage extremely at first, and I am not the less disposed to regret it now."

"Indeed ! Every one says how attentive she is to him, and how nicely they go on together."

"Pshaw, Rachel ! that is just the way. A few words and pretty ways pass with her and all the world for attention, when she is wherever her fancy calls her, all for his good. It is just the attention she showed my uncle. And now it is her will and pleasure to queen it here among her old friends, and she will not open her eyes to see the poor old man's precarious state."

"Do you think him so very ill, Alick ? "

"I was shocked when I saw him yesterday. As to sciatica, that is all nonsense ; the blow in his side has done some serious damage, and if it is not well looked-to, who knows what will be the end of it ! And then, a gay young widow with no control over her—I hate to think of it."

"Indeed," said Rachel, "she is so warm and bright, and really earnest in her kindness, that she will be sure to see her own way right at home. I don't think we can guess how obstinate Lord Keith may be in refusing to take advice."

"He cut me off pretty short," said Alick. "I am afraid he will see no one here ; and, as Bessie says, the move to Scotland would not be easy just now. As I said, she leaves one in the wrong, and I don't like the future. But it is of no use to talk of it ; so let us come and see if my uncle wants to go anywhere."

It was Alick's fate never to meet with sympathy in his feeling of his sister's double-mindedness. Whether it were that he was mistaken, or that she really had the gift of sincerity for the moment in whatever she was saying, the most candid and transparent people in the world—his uncle and his wife—never even succeeded in understanding his

dissatisfaction with Bessie's doings, but always received them at her own valuation. Even while he had been looking forward, with hope deferred, to her residence with him as the greatest solace the world could yet afford him, Mr. Clare had always been convinced that her constant absence from his Rectory, except when his grand neighbours were at home, had been unavoidable, and had always credited the outward tokens of zealous devotion to his church and parish, and to all that was useful or good elsewhere. In effect there was a charm about her which no one but her brother ever resisted, and even he held out by an exertion that made him often appear ungracious.

However, for the present the uneasiness was set aside, in the daily avocations of the Rectory, where Alick was always a very different person from what he appeared in Lady Temple's drawing-room, constantly engaged as he was by unobtrusive watchfulness over his uncle, and active and alert in this service in a manner that was a curious contrast to his ordinary sauntering ways. As to Rachel, the whole state of existence was still a happy dream. She floated on from day to day in the tranquil activity of the Rectory, without daring to look back on the past or to think out her present frame of mind ; it was only the languor and rest of recovery after suffering, and her husband was heedfully watching her, fearing the experiment of the croquet party, though on many accounts feeling the necessity of its being made.

Ermine's hint, that with Rachel it rested to prevent her unpopularity from injuring her husband, had not been thrown away, and she never manifested any shrinking from the party, and even took some interest in arraying herself for it.

"That is what I call well turned out," exclaimed Alick, when she came down.

"Describe her dress, if you please," said Mr. Clare, "I like to hear how my nieces look."

Alick guided his hand. "There, stroke it down, a long white feather in a shady hat trimmed with dark green velvet; she is fresh and rosy, you know, sir, and looks well in green, and then, is it Grace's taste, Rachel? for it is the prettiest thing you have worn—a pale buff sort of silky thing, embroidered all over in the same colour;" and he put a fold of the dress into his uncle's hand.

"Indian, surely," said Mr. Clare, feeling the pattern; "it is too intricate and graceful for the West."

"Yes," said Alick, "I remember now, Grace showed it to me. It was one that Lady Temple brought from India, and never had made up. Poor Grace could get no sympathy from Rachel about the wedding clothes, so she was obliged to come to me."

"And I thought you did not know one of my things from another," said Rachel. "Do you really mean that you care?"

"Depend upon it, he does, my dear," said Mr. Clare. "I have heard him severely critical on his cousins."

"He has been very good in not tormenting me," said Rachel, nestling nearer to him.

"I apprehended the consequences," said Alick; "and besides, you never mounted that black lace pall, or curtain, or whatever you call it, upon your head, after your first attempt at frightening me away with it."

"A cap set against, instead of at," said Mr. Clare, laughing; and therewith his old horse was heard clattering in the yard, and Alick proceeded to drive the well-used phaeton

about three miles through Earlsworthy Park, to a pleasant-looking demesne in the village beyond. As they were turning in at the gate, up came Lady Keith with her two brisk little Shetlands. She was one mass of pretty, fresh, fluttering blue and white muslin, ribbon, and lace, and looked particularly well and brilliant.

“Well met,” she said ; “I called at the Rectory to take up Rachel, but you were flown before me.”

“Yes, we went through the Park.”

“I wish the Duke would come home. I can’t go that way now till I have called. I have no end of things to say to you,” she added, and her little lively ponies shot ahead of the old rectorial steed. However, she waited at the entrance. “Who do you think is come? Colin Keith made his appearance this morning. He has safely captured his Ouralian bear, though not without plenty of trouble, and he could not get him on to Avonmouth till he had been to some chemical institution about an invention. Colin thought him safe there, and rushed down by the train to see us. They go on to-morrow.”

“What did he think of Lord Keith?” said Alick, in the more haste because he feared something being said to remind Rachel that this was the assize week at Avonchester.

“He has settled the matter about advice,” said Bessie, seriously ; “you cannot think what a relief it is. I mean, as soon as I get home, to write and ask Mr. Harvey to come and talk to me to-morrow, and see if the journey to Edinburgh is practicable. I almost thought of sending an apology, and driving over to consult him this afternoon, but I did not like to disappoint Mrs. Huntsford, and I thought Rachel would feel herself lost.”

“Thank you,” said Rachel, “but could we not go away early, and go round by Mr. Harvey’s?”

“Unluckily I have sent the ponies home, and told the close carriage to come for me at nine. It was all settled, and I don’t want to alarm Lord Keith by coming home too soon.”

Alick, who had hitherto listened with interest, here gave his arm to Rachel, as if recollecting that it was time to make their *entrée*. Bessie took her uncle’s, and they were soon warmly welcomed by their kind hostess, who placed them so favourably at luncheon that Rachel was too much entertained to feel any recurrence of the old associations with “company.” Afterwards, Bessie took her into the cool drawing-room, where were a few ladies, who preferred the sofa to croquet or archery, and Lady Keith accomplished a fraternization between Rachel and a plainly dressed lady, who knew all about the social science heroines of whom Rachel had longed to hear. After a time, however, a little girl darted in to call “Aunt Mary” to the aid of some playfellow, who had met with a mishap, and Rachel then perceived herself to have been deserted by her sister-in-law. She knew none of the other ladies, and they made no approaches to her; an access of self-consciousness came on, and feeling forlorn and uncomfortable, she wandered out to look for a friend.

It was not long before she saw Alick walking along the terrace above the croquet players, evidently in quest of her. “How is it with you?” he anxiously asked; “you know you can go home in a moment if you have had enough of this.”

“No, I want nothing, now I have found you. Where is your uncle?”

“Fallen upon one of his oldest friends, who will take care of him, and well out of the way of the croquet traps. Where’s my Lady? I thought you were with her.”

“She disappeared while I was talking to that good Miss Penwell! You must be pleased now, Alick, you see she is really going to see about going to Scotland.”

“I should be better pleased if she had not left that poor old man alone till nine o’clock.”

“She says that when he has his man Saunders to read to him——”

“Don’t tell me what she says; I have enough of that at first hand.”

He broke off with a start. The terrace was prolonged into a walk beyond the screen of evergreens that shut in the main lawn, and, becoming a shrubbery path, led to a smooth glade, on whose turf preparations had been made for a second field of croquet, in case there should have been too many players for the principal arena. This, however, had not been wanted, and no one was visible except a lady and gentleman on a seat under a tree about half-way down on the opposite side of the glade. The lady was in blue and white; the gentleman would hardly have been recognised by Rachel but for the start and thrill of her husband’s arm, and the flush of colour on his usually pale cheek; but, ere he could speak or move, the lady sprang up, and came hastening towards them diagonally across the grass. Rachel saw the danger, and made a warning outcry, “Bessie, the hoop!” but it was too late, she had tripped over it, and fell prone, and entirely unable to save herself. She was much nearer to them than to her late companion, and was struggling to disengage herself when Alick reached her,

lifted her up, and placed her on her feet, supporting her as she clung fast to him, while he asked if she were hurt.

"No, no," she cried. "Don't let him come; don't let him call any one, don't," she reiterated, as Mr. Carleton hovered near, evidently much terrified, but not venturing to approach.

Alick helped her to another garden chair that stood near. She had been entangled in her dress, which had been much torn by her attempt to rise, and hung in a festoon, impeding her, and she moved with difficulty, breathing heavily when she was first seated.

"I don't know if I have not twisted myself a little," she said, in answer to their anxious questions, "but it will go off. Rachel, how scared you look!"

"Don't laugh," exclaimed Rachel, in dread of hysterics, and she plunged her hand into Alick's pocket for a scent-bottle, which he had put there by way of precaution for her, and, while applying it, said, in her full, sedate voice, keeping it as steady as she could, "Shall I drive you home? Alick can walk home with his uncle when he is ready."

"Home! Thank you, Rachel, pray do. Not that I am hurt," she added in her natural voice, "only these rags would tell tales, and there would be an intolerable fuss."

"Then I will bring the carriage round to the road there," said Alick. "I told Joe to be in readiness, and you need not go back to the house."

"Thank you. But, oh, send him away!" she added, with a gasping shudder. "Only don't let him tell any one. Tell him I desire he will not."

After a few words with Mr. Carleton, Alick strode off to the stables, and Rachel asked anxiously after the twist.

"I don't feel it; I don't believe in it. My dear, your strong mind is all humbug, or you would not look so frightened," and again she was on the verge of hysterical laughing; "it is only that I can't stand a chorus of old ladies in commotion. How happy Alick must be to have his prediction verified by some one tumbling over a hoop!" Just then, however, seeing Mr. Carleton still lingering near, she caught hold of Rachel with a little cry, "Don't let him come, dear Rachel; go to him, tell him I am well, but keep him away, and mind he tells no' one!"

Rachel's cold, repellent manner was in full force, and she went towards the poor little man, whose girlish face was blanched with fright.

She told him that Lady Keith did not seem to be hurt, and only wished to be alone, and to go home without attracting notice. He stammered out something about quite understanding, and retreated; while Rachel returned to find Bessie sitting upright, anxiously watching, and she was at once drawn down to sit beside her on the bench, to listen to the excited whisper. "The miserable simpleton! Rachel, Alick was right. I thought, I little thought he would forget how things stand now; but he got back to the old strain, as if—I shall make Lord Keith go to Scotland any way now. I was so thankful to see you and Alick." She proceeded with the agitated vehemence of one who, under a great shock, was saying more than she would have betrayed in a cooler and more guarded mood, "What could possess him? For years he had followed me about like a little dog, and never said more than I let him; and now what folly was in his head, just because I could not walk as far as the ruin with the others. When I said I was going to Scotland, what business had he

to—— Oh ! the others will be coming back, Rachel ; could we not go to meet the carriage ? ”

The attempt to move, however, brought back the feeling of the strain of which she had complained, but she would not give way, and by the help of Rachel’s arm, proceeded across the grass to the carriage-drive, where Alick was to meet them. It seemed very far and very hot, and her alternately excited and shame-stricken manner, and sobbing breath, much alarmed Rachel ; but when Alick met them, all this seemed to pass away—she controlled herself entirely, declaring herself unhurt, and giving him cheerful messages and excuses for her hostess. Alick put the reins into Rachel’s hands, and, after watching her drive off, returned to the party, and delivered the apologies of the ladies ; then went in search of his uncle. He did not, however, find him quickly, and then he was so happy with his old friend among a cluster of merry young people, that Alick would not say a word to hasten him home, especially as Rachel would have driven Bessie to Timber End, so that it would only be returning to an empty house. And such was Mr. Clare’s sociableness and disability of detaching himself from pleasant conversation, that the uncle and nephew scarcely started for their walk across the park in time for the seven o’clock service. Mr. Clare had never been so completely belated, and, as Alick’s assistance was necessary, he could only augur from his wife’s absence that she was still at Timber End with his sister.

CHAPTER XII.

THE END OF CLEVERNESS.

“ Where am I ?
O vanity,
We are not what we deem,
The sins that hold my heart in thrall,
They are more real than all.”—REV. I. WILLIAMS.

As the uncle and nephew came out of church, and approached the yew-tree gate, Rachel came swiftly to meet them. “ Oh, Alick ! oh, uncle ! ” she said breathlessly. “ Bessie says she is shocked to have turned your house upside down, but we could not go any further. And her baby is born ! ” Then in answer to exclamations, half-dismayed, half-wondering, “ Yes, it is all right, so Nurse Jones says. I could not send to you, for we had to send everywhere at once. Mr. Harvey was not at home, and we telegraphed to London, but no one has come yet, and now I have just written a note to Lord Keith with the news of his son and heir. And, uncle, she has set her heart on your baptizing him directly.”

There was some demur, for though the child had made so sudden a rush into the world, there seemed to be no ground for immediate alarm ; and Mr. Clare being always at hand, did not think it expedient to give the name without knowing the father’s wishes with regard to that hereditary Alexander which had been borne by the dead son of the first marriage. A message, however, came down to hasten him, and when—

as he had often before done in cottages—he demanded of Nurse Jones whether private baptism were immediately necessary, she allowed that she saw no pressing danger, but added, “that the lady was in a way about it,” and this both Rachel and her maid strongly corroborated. Rachel’s maid was an experienced person, whom Mrs. Curtis had selected with a view to Rachel’s weak state at the time of her marriage, and she showed herself anxious for anything that might abate Lady Keith’s excitement, to which they at length yielded, feeling that resistance might be dangerous to her. She further insisted that the rite should be performed in her presence; nor was she satisfied when Rachel had brought in her uncle, but insisted on likewise calling in her brother, who vaguely anxious, and fully conscious of the small size of the room, had remained down-stairs.

Mr. Clare always baptized his infant parishioners, and no one was anxious about his manner of handling the little one, the touch of whose garments might be familiar, as being no other than his own parish baby linen. He could do no otherwise than give the child the name reiterated by the mother, in weak but impatient accents, “Alexander Clare,” her brother’s own name, and when the short service was concluded, she called out triumphantly, “Make Alick kiss him, Rachel, and do homage to his young chieftain.”

They obeyed her, as she lay watching them, and a very pretty sight she was with her dark hair lying round her, a rosy colour on her cheeks, and light in her eyes; but Mr. Clare thought both her touch and voice feverish, and entreated Rachel not to let her talk. Indeed Alick longed to take Rachel away, but this was not at present feasible, since her maid was occupied with the infant, and Nurse Jones was

so entirely a cottage practitioner that she was scarcely an available attendant elsewhere. Bessie herself would by no means have parted with her sister-in-law, nor was it possible to reduce her to silence. "Alexander!" she said joyfully, "I always promised my child that he should not have a stupid second son's name. I had a right to my own father's and brother's name, and now it can't be altered," then catching a shade of disapproval upon Rachel's face, "not that I would have hurried it on if I had not thought it right, poor little fellow, but now I trust he will do nicely, and I do think we have managed it all with less trouble than might have been expected."

Sure by this time that she was talking too much, Rachel was glad to hear that Mr. Harvey was come. He was a friendly, elderly man, who knew them all intimately, having attended Alick through his tedious recovery, and his first measure was to clear the room. Rachel thought that "at her age" he might have accepted her services, rather than her maid's, but she suspected Alick of instigating her exclusion, so eagerly did he pounce on her to make her eat, drink, and lie on the sofa, and so supremely scornful was he of her views of sitting up, a measure which *might* be the more needful for want of a bed.

On the whole, however, he was satisfied about her; alarm and excitement had restrung her powers, and she knew herself to have done her part, so that she was ready to be both cheerful and important over the evening meal. Mr. Clare was by no means annoyed at this vicissitude, but rather amused at it, and specially diverted at the thought of what would be Mr. Lifford's consternation. Lord Keith's servant had come over, reporting his master to be a good deal worn out by the

afternoon's anxiety, and recommending that he should not be again disturbed that night, so he was off their minds, and the only drawback to the pleasantness of the evening was surprise at seeing and hearing nothing from Mr. Harvey. The London doctor arrived, he met him and took him up-stairs at once ; and then ensued a long stillness, all attempts at conversation died away, and Alick only now and then made attempts to send his companions to bed. Mr. Clare went out to the hall to listen, or Rachel stole up to the extemporary nursery to consult Nurse Jones, whom she found very gruff at having been turned out in favour of the stranger maid.

It was a strange time of suspense. Alick made Rachel lie on the sofa, and she almost heard the beating of her own heart ; he sat by her, trying to seem to read, and his uncle stood by the open window, where the tinkle of a sheep bell came softly in from the meadows, and now and then the hoot of the owl round the church tower made the watchers start. To watch that calm and earnest face was their great help in that hour of alarm ; those sightless eyes, and broad, upraised spiritual brow seemed so replete with steadfast trust and peace, that the very sight was soothing and supporting to the young husband and wife ; and when the long strokes of twelve resounded from the church tower, Mr. Clare, turning towards them, began in his full, musical voice to repeat Bishop Ken's noble midnight hymn—

“ My God, now I from sleep awake,
The sole possession of me take ;
From midnight terrors me secure,
And guard my soul from thoughts impure.”

To Rachel, who had so often heard that hour strike amid a tumult of midnight miseries, there was something in these

words inexpressibly gentle and soothing ; the tears sprang into her eyes, as if she had found the spell to chase the grisly phantoms, and she clasped her husband's hand, as though to communicate her comfort.

“ Oh may I always ready stand,
With my lamp burning in my hand ;
May I in sight of Heaven rejoice,
Whene'er I hear the Bridegroom's voice.”

Mr. Clare had just repeated this verse, when he paused, saying, “ They are coming down,” and moved quickly to meet them in the hall. Alick followed him to the door, but as they entered the dining-rōom, after a moment's hesitation, returned to Rachel, as she sat upright and eager. “ After all, this may mean nothing,” he said.

“ Oh, we don't make it better by fancying it nothing,” said Rachel. “ Let us try to meet it like your uncle. Oh, Alick, it seemed all this time as if I could pray again, as I never could since those sad times. He seemed so sure, such a rock to help and lean on.”

He drew her close to him. “ You are praying for her ! ” he murmured, his soul so much absorbed in his sister that he could not admit other thoughts, and still they waited and watched till other sounds were heard. The London doctor was going away. Alick sprang to the door, and opened it as his uncle's hand was on the lock. There was a mournful, solemn expression on his face, as they gazed mutely up in expectation. “ Children,” he said, “ it is as we feared. This great sorrow is coming on us.”

“ Then there is danger,” said Alick with stunned calmness.

“More than danger,” said his uncle ; “they have tried all that skill can do.”

“Was it the fall ?” said Alick.

“It was my bad management, it always is,” said Rachel, ever affirmative.

“No, dear child,” said Mr. Clare, “there was fatal injury in the fall, and even absolute stillness for the last few hours could hardly have saved her. You have nothing to reproach yourself with.”

“And now ?” asked Alick, hoarsely.

“Much more exhausted than when we were with her ; sometimes faint, but still feverish. They think it may last many hours yet, poor dear child ; she has so much youth and strength.”

“Does she know ?”

“Harvey thought some of their measures alarmed her, but they soothed and encouraged her while they saw hope, and he thinks she has no real fears.”

“And how is it to be——?” said Alick. “She ought——”

“Yes ; Harvey thinks she ought, she is fully herself, and it can make no difference now. He is gone to judge about coming up at once ; but Alick, my poor boy, you must speak to her. I have found that without seeing the face I cannot judge what my words may be doing.”

Rachel asked about poor Lord Keith, and was told that he was to be left in quiet that night, unless his wife should be very anxious for him at once. Mr. Harvey came down, bringing word that his patient was asking urgently for Mrs. Keith.

“You had better let me go in first,” said Alick, his face changed by the firm but tender awe-struck look.

“ Not if she is asking for me,” said Rachel, moving on, her heart feeling as if it would rend asunder, but her looks composed.

Bessie’s face was in shade, but her voice had the old ring of coaxing archness. “ I thought you would stay to see the doctors off. They had their revenge for our stealing a march on them, and have prowled about me till I was quite faint ; and now I don’t feel a bit like sleep, though I am so tired. Would Alick think me very wicked if I kept you a little while ? Don’t I see Alick’s shadow ? Dear old fellow, are you come to wish me good-night ? That is good of you. I am not going to plague you any more, Alick, I shall be so good now ! But what ?” as he held back the curtain, and the light fell on his face, “ Oh ! there is nothing wrong with the baby ?”

“ No, dear Bessie, not with the *baby*,” said Alick, with strong emphasis.

“ What, myself ?” she said quickly, turning her eyes from one face to the other.

Alick told her the state of the case. Hers was a resolute character, or perhaps the double nature that had perplexed and chafed her brother was so integral that nothing could put it off. She fully comprehended, but as if she and herself were two separate persons. She asked how much time might be left to her, and hearing the doctor’s opinion, said, “ Then I think my poor old Lord Keith had better have his night’s rest in peace. But, oh ! I should like to speak to Colin. Send for him, Alick ; telegraph, Alick ; he is at the Paddington Hotel. Send directly.”

She was only tranquillized by her brother beginning to write a telegraphic message.

“Rachel,” she said, presently, “Ermine must marry him now, and see to Lord Keith, and the little one—tell her so, please;” then with her unfailing courtesy, “he will seem like your own child, dear Rachel, and you should have him; but you’ll have a wandering home with the dear old Highlanders. Oh! I wonder if he will ever go into them, there must always be a Keith there, and they say he is sure of the Victoria Cross, though papa will not send up his name because of being his own son.” Then passing her hand over her face, she exclaimed—“Wasn’t I talking great nonsense, Rachel? I don’t seem able to say what I mean.”

“It is weakness, dearest,” said Rachel, “perhaps you might gain a little strength if you were quite still and listened to my uncle.”

“Presently. O Rachel! I like the sound of your voice; I am glad Alick has got you. You suit him better than his wicked little sister ever did. You have been so kind to me to-night, Rachel; I never thought I should have loved you so well, when I quizzed you. I did use you ill then, Rachel, but I think you won Alick by it just by force of contrast,”—she was verging into the dreamy voice, and Rachel requested her to rest and be silent.

“It can’t make any difference,” said Bessie, “and I’ll try to be quiet and do all right, if you’ll just let me have my child again. I do want to know who he is like. I am so glad it is not he that was hurt. Oh! I did so want to have brought him up to be like Alick.”

The infant was brought, and she insisted on being lifted to see its face, which she declared to resemble her brother; but here her real self seemed to gain the mastery, and calling it a poor little motherless thing, she fell into a fit of violent

convulsive weeping, which ended in a fainting fit, and this was a fearfully perceptible stage on her way to the dark valley.

She was, however, conscious when she revived, and sent for her uncle, whom she begged to let her be laid in his churchyard, "near the willow-tree ; not next to my aunt, I'm not good enough," she said, "but I could not bear that old ruined abbey, where all the Keiths go, and Alick always wanted me to be here—Alick was right !"

The dreamy mist was coming on, nor was it ever wholly dispelled again. She listened, or seemed to listen, to her uncle's prayers, but whenever he ceased, she began to talk—perhaps sensibly at first, but soon losing the thread—sometimes about her child or husband, sometimes going back to those expressions of Charles Carleton that had been so dire a shock to her. "He ought not ! I thought he knew better ! Alick was right ! Come away, Rachel, I'll never see him again. I have done nothing that he should insult me. Alick was right !"

Then would come the sobs, terrible in themselves, and ending in fainting, and the whole scene was especially grievous to Alick, even more than to either of the others ; for as her perception failed her, association carried her back to old arguments with him, and sometimes it was, "Alick, indeed you do like to attribute motives," sometimes "Indeed it is not all self-deception," or the recurring wail, "Alick is right, only don't let him be so angry !" If he told her how far he was from anger, she would make him kiss her, or return to some playful rejoinder, more piteous to hear than all, or in the midst would come on the deadly swoon.

Morning light was streaming into the room when one of

these swoons had fallen on her, and no means of restoration availed to bring her back to anything but a gasping condition, in which she lay supported in Rachel's arms. The doctor had his hand on her pulse, the only sounds outside were the twittering of the birds, and within, the ticking of the clock, Alick's deep-drawn breaths, and his uncle's prayer. Rachel felt a thrill pass through the form she was supporting, she looked at Mr. Harvey, and understood his glance, but neither moved till Mr. Clare's voice finished, when the doctor said, "I feared she would have suffered much more. Thank God!"

He gently relieved Rachel from the now lifeless weight, and they knelt on for some moments in complete stillness, except that Alick's breath became more laboured, and his shuddering and shivering could no longer be repressed. Rachel was excessively terrified to perceive that his whole frame was trembling like an aspen leaf. He rose, however, bent to kiss his sister's brow, and steadyng himself by the furniture, made for the door. The others followed him, and in a few rapid words Rachel was assured that her fears were ungrounded, it was only an attack of his old Indian fever, which was apt to recur on any shock, but was by no means alarming, though for the present it must be given way to. Indeed, his teeth were chattering too much for him to speak intelligibly, when he tried to tell Rachel to rest and not think of him.

This of course was impossible, and the sun had scarcely risen before he was placed in his old quarters, the bed in the little inner study, and Rachel watched over him while Mr. Clare had driven off with the doctor to await the awakening of Lord Keith.

Rachel had never so much needed strength. It was hard to believe the assurances of Alick, the doctor, and the whole house, that his condition was not critical, for he was exceedingly ill for some hours, the ailment having been coming on all night, though it was forced back by the resolute will, and it was aggravated by the intensity of his grief, which on the other hand broke forth the more violently from the failure of the physical powers. The brother and sister had been so long alone in the world together, and with all her faults she had been so winning, that it was a grievous loss to him, coming too in the full bloom of her beauty and prosperity, when he was conscious of having dealt severely with her foibles. All was at an end—that double thread of brilliant good-nature and worldly selfishness, with the one strand of sound principle sometimes coming into sight. The life was gone from the earth in its incompleteness, without an unravelling of its complicated texture, and the wandering utterances that revealed how entirely the brother stood first with her, added poignancy to his regret for having been harsh with her. It could hardly be otherwise than that his censures, however just, should now recoil upon him, and in vain did Rachel try to point out that every word of his sister's had proved that her better sense had all along acquiesced—he only felt what it might have been if he had been more indulgent and less ironical, and gave himself infinitely harder measure than he ever could have shown to her. It was long before the suffering, either mental or bodily, by any means abated, and Rachel felt extremely lonely, deserted, and doubtful whether she were in any way ministering to his relief; but at last a gleam of satisfaction came upon her. He evidently did like her attendance on him, and he

began to say something about Bessie's real love and esteem for her—softer grief was setting in, and the ailment was lessening.

The summer morning was advancing, and the knell rung out its two deep notes from the church tower. Rachel had been dreading the effect on him, but he lay still, as if he had been waiting for it, and was evidently counting the twenty-three strokes that told the age of the deceased. Then he said he was mending, and that he should fall asleep if Rachel would leave him, see after the poor child, and if his uncle should not come home within the next quarter of an hour, take measures to silence the bell for the morning service; after which, he laid his injunctions on her to rest, or what should he say to her mother? And the approach to a smile with which these last words were spoken, enabled Rachel to obey in some comfort.

After satisfying herself that the child was doing well, Rachel was obliged to go into her former room, and there to stand face to face with the white, still countenance so lately beaming with life. She was glad to be alone. The marble calm above all counteracted and drove aside the painful phantom left by Lovedy's agony, and yet the words of that poor, persecuted, suffering child came surging into her mind full of peace and hope. Perhaps it was the first time she had entered into what it is for weak things to confound the wise, or how things hidden from the intellectual can be revealed to babes; and she hid her face in her hands, and was thankful for the familiar words of old, "That we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life."

The continued clang of the bell warned her. She looked round at the still uncleared room, poor Bessie's rings and bracelets lying mingled with her own on the toilet table, and

her little clock, Bessie's own gift, standing ticking on as it had done at her peaceful rising only yesterday morning.

She took out her hat, and was on her way to silence the bell-ringer, when Mr. Clare was driven up to the churchyard gate.

Lord Keith had been greatly shocked, but not over-powered ; he had spoken calmly, and made minute inquiries, and Mr. Clare was evidently a little disappointed, repeating that age and health made a difference, and that people showed their feelings in various ways. Colonel Keith had been met at the station, and was with his brother, but would come to make arrangements in the course of the day. Rachel begged to stop the bell, representing that the assembled congregation included no male person capable of reading the lessons ; but Mr. Clare answered, “No, my dear, this is not a day to do without such a beginning. We must do what we can. Or stay, it is the last chapter of St. John. I could hardly fail in that. Sit near me, and give me the word if I do, unless you want to be with Alick.”

As Rachel knelt that day, the scales of self-conceit seemed to have gone. She had her childhood's heart again. Her bitter remorse, her afterthoughts of perplexity had been lulled in the long calm of the respite, and when roused again, even by this sudden sorrow, she woke to her old trust and hope. And when she listened to the expressive though calm rehearsal of that solemn sunrise-greeting to the weary darkling fishers on the shore of the mountain lake, it was to her as if the form so long hidden from her by mists of her own raising, once more shone forth, smoothing the vexed waters of her soul, and she could say with a new thrill of recognition, “It is the Lord.”

Once Mr. Clare missed a word, and paused for aid. She was crying too much to be ready, and, through her tears, could not recover the passage so as to prompt him before he had himself recalled the verse. Perhaps a sense of failure was always good for Rachel, but she was much concerned, and her apologies quite distressed Mr. Clare.

“ Dear child, no one could be expected to keep the place when there was so much to dwell on in the very comfort of the chapter. And now if you are not in haste, would you take me to the place that dear Bessie spoke of, by the willow-tree. I am almost afraid little Mary Lawrence’s grave may have left too little space.”

Rachel guided him to a lovely spot, almost overhanging the stream, with the dark calm pools beneath the high bank, and the willow casting a long morning shadow over it. Her mind went back to the merry drive from Avonchester, when she had first seen Elizabeth Keith, and had little dreamt that in one short year she should be choosing the spot for her grave. Mr. Clare paced the green nook and was satisfied, asking if it were not a very pretty place.

“ Yes,” said Rachel, “ there is such a quiet freshness, and the willow-tree seems to guard it.”

“ Is there not a white foxglove on the bank ?”

“ Yes, but with only a bell or two left at the top of the side spikes.”

“ Your aunt sowed the seed. It is strange that I was very near choosing this place nine years ago, but it could not be seen from my window, which was an object with me then.”

Just then his quick ear detected that some one was at the parsonage door, and Rachel, turning round, exclaimed with horror, “ It is that unhappy Mr. Carleton.”

“Poor young fellow,” said Mr. Clare, with more of pity than of anger, “I had better speak to him.”

But they were far from the path, and it was not possible to guide the blind steps rapidly between the graves and head stones; so that before the pathway was reached young Carleton must have received the sad reply to his inquiries, for hurrying from the door he threw himself on his horse, and rode off at full speed.

By the afternoon, when Colonel Keith came to Bishopton, Alick was lying on the sofa with such a headache that he could neither see nor spell, and Rachel was writing letters for him, both in the frame of mind in which the Colonel’s genuine warm affection and admiration for Bessie was very comforting, assisting them in putting all past misgivings out of sight. He had induced his brother to see Mr. Harvey, and the result had been that Lord Keith had consented to a consultation the next day with an eminent London surgeon, since it was clear that the blow, not the sciatica, was answerable for the suffering which was evidently becoming severe. The Colonel of course intended to remain with his brother, at least till after the funeral.

“Can you?” exclaimed Alick. “Ought you not to be at Avonchester?”

“I am not a witness, and the case is in excellent hands.”

“Could you not run down? I shall be available tomorrow, and I could be with Lord Keith.”

“Thank you, Alick, it is impossible for me to leave him,” said Colin, so quietly that no one could have guessed how keenly he felt the being deprived of bringing her brother to Ermine, and being present at the crisis to which all his thoughts and endeavours had so long been directed.

That assize day had long been a dream of dread to Rachel, and perhaps even more so to her husband. Yet how remote its interest actually seemed ! They scarcely thought of it for the chief part of the day. Alick looking very pale, though calling himself well, went early to Timber End, and he had not long been gone before a card was brought in, with an urgent entreaty that Mrs. Keith would see Mrs. Carleton. Rachel longed to consult Mr. Clare, but he had gone out to a sick person, and she was obliged to decide that Alick could scarcely wish her to refuse, reluctant and indignant as she felt. But her wrath lessened as she saw the lady's tears and agitation, so great that for a moment no words were possible, and the first were broken apologies for intruding, “ Nothing should have induced her, but her poor son was in such a dreadful state.”

Rachel again became cold and stern, and did not relent at the description of Charlie’s horror and agony ; for she was wondering at the audacity of mentioning his grief to the wife of Lady Keith’s brother, and thinking that this weak, indulgent mother was the very person to make a foolish, mischievous son, and it was on her tongue’s end that she did not see to what she was indebted for the favour of such a visit. Perhaps Mrs. Carleton perceived her resentment, for she broke off, and urgently asked if poor dear Lady Keith had alluded to anything that had passed. “ Yes,” Rachel was forced to say ; and when again pressed as to the manner of alluding, replied, that “ she was exceedingly distressed and displeased,” with difficulty refraining from saying who had done all the mischief. Mrs. Carleton was in no need of hearing it. “ Ah ! ” she said, “ it was right, quite right. It was very wrong of my poor boy. Indeed I am not

excusing him, but if you only knew how he blames himself."

"I am sure he ought," Rachel could not help saying.

Mrs. Carleton here entreated her to listen, and seized her hand, so that there was no escape. The tale was broken and confused, but there could be little doubt of its correctness. Poor Bessie had been the bane of young Carleton's life. She had never either decidedly accepted or repelled his affection, but, as she had truly said, let him follow her like a little dog, and amused herself with him in the absence of better game. He was in his father's office, but her charms disturbed his application to business and kept him trifling among the croquet lawns of Littleworthy, whence his mother never had the resolution to banish her spoilt child. At last Miss Keith's refusal of him, softened by a half-implied hope, sent him forth to his uncle at Rio, on the promise that if he did his utmost there, he should in three years be enabled to offer Miss Keith more than a competence. With this hope he had for the first time applied himself to business in earnest, when he received the tidings of her marriage, and like a true spoilt child broke down at once in resolution, capacity, and health, so that his uncle was only too glad to ship him off for England. And when Lady Keith made her temporary home in her old neighbourhood, the companionship began again, permitted by her in good nature, and almost contempt, and allowed by his family in confidence of the rectitude of both parties; and indeed nothing could be more true than that no harm had been intended. But it was perilous ground; ladies, however highly principled, cannot leave off self-pleasing habits all at once, and the old terms returned sufficiently to render the barrier but slightly felt. When Lady

Keith had spoken of her intention of leaving Timber End, the reply had been the old complaint of her brother's harshness and jealousy of his ardent and lasting affection, and reproof had not at once silenced him. This it was that had so startled her as to make her hurry to her brother's side, unheeding of her steps.

As far as Rachel could make out, the poor young man's grief and despair had been poured out to his mother, and she, unable to soothe, had come to try to extract some assurance that the catastrophe had been unconnected with his folly. A very slight foundation would have served her, but this Rachel would not give, honestly believing him the cause of the accident, and also that the shock to the sense of duty higher than he could understand had occasioned the excitement which had destroyed the slender possibility of recovery. She pitied the unhappy man more than she had done at first, and she was much pained by his mother's endeavours to obtain a palliative for him, but she could not be untrue. "Indeed," she said, "I fear no one can say it was not so; I don't think anything is made better by blinking the reality."

"Oh, Mrs. Keith, it is so dreadful. I cannot tell my poor son. I don't know what might be the consequence."

Tears came into Rachel's eyes. "Indeed," she said, "I am very sorry for you. I believe every one knows that I have felt what it is to be guilty of fatal mischief; but, indeed, indeed I am sure that to realize it all is the only way to endure it, so as to be the better for it. Believe me, I am very sorry; but I don't think it would be any real comfort to your son to hear that poor Bessie had never been careful, or that I was inexperienced, or the nurse ignorant. It is

better to look at it fairly. I hear Mr. Clare coming in. Will you see him?" she added suddenly, much relieved.

But Mrs. Carleton did not wish to see him, and departed, thinking Alick Keith's wife as bad as had ever been reported, and preparing an account of her mismanagement wherewith to remove her son's remorse.

She was scarcely gone, and Rachel had not had time to speak to Mr. Clare, before another visitor was upon her, no other than Lord Keith's daughter, Mrs. Comyn Menteith; or, as she introduced herself, "I'm Isabel. I came down from London to-day because it was so very shocking and deplorable, and I am dying to see my poor little brother and uncle Colin. I must keep away from poor papa till the doctors are gone, so I came here."

She was a little woman in the delicately featured style of sandy prettiness, and exceedingly talkative and good-natured. The rapid tongue, though low and modulated, jarred painfully on Rachel's feelings in the shaded staircase, and she was glad to shut the door of the temporary nursery, when Mrs. Menteith pounced upon the poor little baby, pitying him with all her might, comparing him with her own children, and asking authoritative questions, coupled with demonstrations of her intention of carrying him off to her own nursery establishment, which had been left in Scotland with a head nurse, whose name came in with every fourth word—that is, if he lived at all, which she seemed to think a hopeless matter.

She spoke of "poor dear Bessie," with such affection as was implied in "Oh, she was such a darling! I got on with her immensely. Why didn't you send to me, though I don't know that Donald would have let me come;" and she in-

sisted on learning the whole history, illustrating it profusely with personal experiences. Rachel was constantly hoping to be released from a subject so intensely painful ; but curiosity prevailed through the chatter, and kept hold of the thread of the story. Mrs. Menteith decidedly thought herself defrauded of a summons. “ It was very odd of them all not to telegraph for me. Those telegrams are such a dreadful shock. There came one just as I set out from Timber End, and I made sure little Sandie was ill at home, for you know the child is very delicate, and there are so many things going about, and what with all this dreadful business, I was ready to faint, and after all it was only a stupid thing for Uncle Colin from those people at Avonchester.”

“ You do not know what it was ? ”

“ Somebody was convicted or acquitted, I forget which, but I know it had something to do with Uncle Colin’s journey to Russia ; so ridiculous of him at his age, when he ought to know better, and so unlucky for all the family, his engagement to that swindler’s sister. By-the-bye, did he not cheat you out of ever so much money ? ”

“ Oh, that had nothing to do with it—it was not Miss Williams’s brother—it was not he that was tried.”

“ Wasn’t he ? I thought he was found guilty or something ; but it is very unfortunate for the family, for Uncle Colin won’t give her up, though she is a terrible cripple, too. And to tell you a secret, it was his obstinacy that made papa marry again ; and now it is of no use, this poor little fellow will never live, and this sharper’s sister will be Lady Keith after all ! So unlucky ! Papa says she is very handsome, and poor Bessie declares she is quite lady-like.”

“The most superior person I ever knew,” said Rachel, indignantly.

“Ah, yes, of course she must be very clever and artful if her brother is a swindler.”

“But indeed he is not, he was cheated ; the swindler was Maddox.”

“Oh, but he was a glass-blower, or something, I know, and her sister is a governess. I am sure it is no fault of mine ! The parties I gave to get him and Jessie Douglas together ! Donald was quite savage about the bills. And after all Uncle Colin went and caught cold, and would not come ! I would not have minded half so much if it had been Jessie Douglas ; but to have her at Gowanbrae—a glass-blower’s daughter—isn’t it too bad ?”

“Her father was a clergyman of a good Welsh family.”

“Was he ? Then her brother or somebody had something to do with glass.”

Attempts at explanation were vain, the good lady had an incapacity of attention, and was resolved on her grievance. She went away at last because “those horrid doctors will be gone now, and I will be able to see poor papa, and tell him when I will take home the baby, though I don’t believe he will live to be taken anywhere, poor dear little man.”

She handled him so much more scientifically than Rachel could do, that it was quite humiliating, and yet to listen to her talk, and think of committing any child to her charge was sickening, and Rachel already felt a love and pity for her little charge that made her wretched at the thoughts of the prognostic about him.

“You are tired with your visitors, my dear,” said Mr.

Clare, holding out his hand towards her, when she returned to him.

“How do you know?” she asked.

“By the sound of your move across the room, and the stream of talk I heard above must be enough to exhaust any one.”

“She thinks badly of that poor child,” said Rachel, her voice trembling.

“My dear, it would take a good deal to make me uneasy about anything I heard in that voice.”

“And if he lives, she is to have the charge of him,” added Rachel.

“That is another matter on which I would suspend my fears,” said Mr. Clare. “Come out, and take a turn in the peacock path. You want air more than rest. So you have been talked to death.”

“And I am afraid she is gone to talk Alick to death! I wonder when Alick will come home,” she proceeded, as they entered on the path. “She says Colonel Keith had a telegram about the result of the trial, but she does not know what it was, nor indeed who was tried.”

“Alick will not keep you in doubt longer than he can help,” said Mr. Clare.

“You know all about it;” said Rachel. “The facts every one must know, but I mean that which led to them.”

“Alick told me you had suffered very much.”

“I don’t know whether it is a right question, but if it is, I should much like to know what Alick did say. I begged him to tell you all, or it would not have been fair towards you to bring me here.”

“He told me that he knew you had been blind and wilful,

but that your confidence had been cruelly abused, and you had been most unselfish throughout."

"I did not mean so much what I had done as what I am—what I was."

"The first time he mentioned you, it was as one of the reasons that he wished to take our dear Bessie to Avonmouth. He said there was a girl there of a strong spirit, independent and thorough-going, and thinking for herself. He said, 'to be sure, she generally thinks wrong, but there's a candour and simplicity about her that make her wildest blunders better than parrot commonplace,' and he thought your reality might impress his sister. Even then I gathered what was coming."

"And how wrong and foolish you must have thought it."

"I hoped I might trust my boy's judgment."

"Indeed, you could not think it worse for him than I did; but I was ill and weak, and could not help letting Alick do what he would; but I have never understood it. I told him how unsettled my views were, and he did not seem to mind——"

"My dear, may I ask if this sense of being unsettled is with you still?"

"I don't know! I had no power to read or think for a long time; and now, since I have been here, I hope it has not been hypocrisy, for going on in your way and his has been very sweet to me, and made me feel as I used when I was a young girl, with only an ugly dream between. I don't like to look at it, and yet that dream was my real life that I made for myself."

"Dear child, I have little doubt that Alick knew it would come to this."

Rachel paused. "What, you and he think a woman's doubts so vague and shallow as to be always mastered by a husband's influence?"

Mr. Clare was embarrassed. If he had thought so he had not expected her to make the inference. He asked her if she could venture to look back on her dream so as to mention what had chiefly distressed her. He could not see her frowning effort at recollection, but after a pause, she said, "Things will seem to you like trifles, indeed, individual criticisms appear so to me; but the difficulty to my mind is that I don't see these objections fairly grappled with. There is either denunciation or weak argument; but I can better recollect the impression on my own mind than what made it."

"Yes, I know that feeling; but are you sure you have seen all the arguments?"

"I cannot tell—perhaps not. Whenever I get a book with anything in it, somebody says it is not sound."

"And you therefore conclude that a sound book can have nothing in it?" he asked, smiling.

"Well, most of the new 'sound' books that I have met are just what my mother and sister like—either dull, or sentimental and trashy."

"Perhaps those that get into popular circulation do deserve some of your terms for them. Illogical replies break down and carry off some who have pinned their faith to them; but are you sure that though you have read much, you have read deep?"

"I have read more deeply than any one I know—women, I mean—or than any man ever showed me he had read. Indeed, I am trying not to say it in conceit, but Ermine

Williams does not read argumentative books, and gentlemen almost always make as if they knew nothing about them."

"I think you may be of great use to me, my dear, if you will help me. The bishop has desired me to preach the next visitation sermon, and he wishes it to be on some of these subjects. Now, if you will help me with the book work, it will be very kind in you, and might serve to clear your mind about some of the details, though you must be prepared for some questions being unanswered."

"Best so," replied Rachel, "I don't like small answers to great questions."

"Nor I. Only let us take care not to get absorbed in admiring the boldness that picks out stones to be stumbled over."

"Do you object to my having read, and thought, and tried?"

"Certainly not. Those who have the capability should, if they feel disturbed, work out the argument. Nothing is gained while it is felt that both sides have not been heard. I do not myself believe that a humble, patient, earnest spirit can go far wrong, though it may for a time be tried, and people often cry out at the first stumbling block, and then feel committed to the exclamations they have made."

The conversation was here ended by the sight of Alick coming slowly and wearily in from the churchyard, looking as if some fresh weight were upon him, and he soon told them that the doctors had pronounced that Lord Keith was in a critical state, and would probably have much to suffer from the formation that had begun where he had received the neglected bruise in the side. No word of censure of

poor Bessie had been breathed, nor did Alick mention her name, but he deeply suffered under the fulfilment of his own predictions, and his subdued, dejected manner expressed far more than did his words. Rachel asked how Lord Keith seemed.

“Oh, there’s no getting at his feelings. He was very civil to me—asked after you, Rachel—told me to give you his thanks, but not a single word about anything nearer. Then I had to read the paper to him—all that dinner at Liverpool, and he made remarks, and expected me to know what it was about. I suppose he does feel ; the Colonel says he is exceedingly cut up, and he looks like a man of eighty, infinitely worse than last time I saw him, but I don’t know what to make of him.”

“And, Alick, did you hear the verdict ?”

“What verdict ?”

“That man at Avonchester. Mrs. Menteith said there had been a telegram.”

Alick looked startled. “This has put everything out of my head !” he said. “What was the verdict ?”

“That was just what she could not tell. She did not quite know who was tried.”

“And she came here and harassed you with it,” he said, looking at her anxiously. “As if you had not gone through enough already.”

“Never mind that now. It seems so long ago now that I can hardly think much about it ; and I have had another visitor,” she added, as Mr. Clare left them to themselves, “Mrs. Carleton—that poor son of hers is in such distress.”

“She has been palavering you over,” he said, in a tone more like displeasure than he had ever used towards her.

"Indeed, Alick, if you would listen, you would find him very much to be pitied."

"I only wish never to hear of any of them again." He did not speak like himself, and Rachel was aghast.

"I thought you would not object to my letting her in," she began.

"I never said I did," he answered ; "I can never think of him but as having caused her death, and it was no thanks to him that there was nothing worse."

The sternness of his manner would have silenced Rachel but for her strong sense of truth and justice, which made her persevere in saying, "There may have been more excuse than you believe."

"Do you suppose that is any satisfaction to me?" He walked decidedly away, and entered by the library window, and she stood grieved and wondering whether she had been wrong in pitying, or whether he were too harsh in his indignation. It was a sign that her tone and spirit had recovered, that she did not succumb in judgment, though she felt utterly puzzled and miserable till she recollected how unwell, weary, and unhappy he was, and that every fresh perception of his sister's errors was like a poisoned arrow to him ; and then she felt shocked at having obtruded the subject on him at all, and when she found him leaning back in his chair, spent and worn out, she waited on him in the quietest, gentlest way she could accomplish, and tried to show that she had put the subject entirely aside. However, when they were next alone together, he turned his face away and muttered, "What did that woman say to you ?"

"Oh, Alick, I am sorry I began ! It only gives you pain."

"Go on——"

She did go on till she had told all, and he uttered no word of comment. She longed to ask whether he disapproved of her having permitted the interview ; but as he did not again recur to the topic, it was making a real and legitimate use of strength of mind to abstain from teasing him on the matter. Yet when she recollected what worldly honour would once have exacted of a military man, and the conflicts between religion and public opinion, she felt thankful indeed that half a century lay between her and that terrible code, and even as it was, perceiving the strong hold that just resentment had taken on her husband's silently determined nature, she could not think of the neighbourhood of the Carleton family without dread.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE POST BAG.

“Thefts, like ivy on a ruin, make the rifts they seem to shade.”—
C. G. DUFFY.

“August 3d, 7 A.M.

“MY DEAR COLONEL KEITH,—Papa is come, and I have got up so early in the morning that I have nothing to do but to write to you before we go in to Avoncester. Papa and Mr. Beechum came by the six o'clock train, and Lady Temple sent me in the waggonette to meet them. Aunt Ailie would not go, because she was afraid Aunt Ermine would get anxious whilst she was waiting. I saw papa directly, and yet I did not think it could be papa, because you were not there, and he looked quite past me, and I do not think he would have found me or the carriage at all if Mr. Beechum had not known me. And then, I am afraid I was very naughty, but I could not help crying just a little when I found you had not come ; but perhaps Lady Keith may be better, and you may come before I go into court to-day, and then I shall tear up this letter. I am afraid papa thought I was unkind to cry when he was just come home, for he did not talk to me near so much as Mr. Beechum did, and his eyes kept looking out as if he did not see anything near, only quite far away. And I suppose Russian coats must be made of some sort of sheep that eats tobacco.”

“August 3d, 10 A.M.

“DEAREST COLIN,—I have just lighted on poor little Rosie’s before-breakfast composition, and I can’t refrain from sending you her first impressions, poor child, though no doubt they will alter, as she sees more of her father. All are gone to Avonchester now, though with some doubts whether this be indeed the critical day ; I hope it may be, the sooner this is over the better ; but I am full of hope. I cannot believe but that the Providence that has done so much to discover Edward’s innocence to the world, will finish the work ! I have little expectation though of your coming down in time to see it ; the copy of the telegraphic message, which you sent by Harry, looks as bad as possible, and even allowing something for inexperience and fright, things must be in a state in which you could hardly leave your brother, so unwell as he seems.

“2 p.m. I was interrupted by Lady Temple, who was soon followed by Mrs. Curtis, burning to know whether I had any more intelligence than had floated to them. Pray, if you can say anything to exonerate poor Rachel from mismanagement, say it strongly ; her best friends are so engaged in wishing themselves there, and pitying poor Bessie for being in her charge, that I long to confute them, for I fully believe in her sense and spirit in any real emergency that she had not ridden out to encounter.

“And I have written so far without a word on the great subject of all, the joy untold for which our hearts had ached so long, and which we owe entirely to you ; for Edward owns that nothing but your personal representations would have brought him, and, as I suppose you already know—he so much hated the whole subject of Maddox’s treachery that

he had flung aside, unread, all that he saw related to it. Dear Colin, whatever else you have done, you have filled a famished heart. Could you but have seen Ailie's face all last evening as she sat by his side, you would have felt your reward—it was as if the worn, anxious, almost stern mask had been taken away, and our Ailie's face was beaming out as of old when she was the family pet, before Julia took her away to be finished. She sees no change; she is in an ecstacy of glamour that makes her constantly repeat her rejoicings that Edward is so much himself, so unchanged, till I almost feel unsisterly for seeing in him the traces that these sad years have left, and that poor little Rose herself has detected. No, he is not so much changed as exaggerated. The living to himself, and with so cruel a past, has greatly increased the old dreaminess that we always tried to combat, and he seems less able than before to turn his mind into any channel but the one immediately before him. He is most loving when roused, but infinitely more inclined to fall off into a muse. I am afraid you must have had a troublesome charge in him, judging by the uproar Harry makes about the difficulty of getting him safe from Paddington. It is good to see him and Harry together—the old schoolboy ways are so renewed, all bitterness so entirely forgotten, only Harry rages a little that he is not more wrapped up in Rose. To say the truth, so do I; but if it were not for Harry's feeling the same, I should believe that you had taught me to be exacting about my rosebud. Partly, it is that he is disappointed that she is not like her mother; he had made up his mind to another Lucy, and her Williams face took him by surprise, and, partly, he is not a man to adapt himself to a child. She must be trained to help unobtrusively in his

occupations ; the unknowing little plaything her mother was, she never can be. I am afraid he will never adapt himself to English life again—his soul seems to be in his mines, and if as you say he is happy and valued there—though it is folly to look forward to the wrench again, instead of rejoicing in the present gladness ; but often as I had fashioned that arrival in my fancy, it was never that Harry's voice, not yours, should say the 'Here he is.'

"They all went this morning in the waggonette, and the two boys with Miss Curtis in the carriage. Lady Temple is very kind in coming in and out to enliven me. I am afraid I must close and send this before their return. What a day it is ! And how are you passing it ? I fear, even at the best, in much anxiety. Lady Temple asks to put in a line.—Yours ever,

"E. W."

"August 3d, 5 p.m.

"MY DEAR COLONEL,—This is just to tell you that dear Ermine is very well, and bearing the excitement and suspense wonderfully. We were all dreadfully shocked to hear about poor dear Bessie ; it is so sad her having no mother nor anyone but Rachel to take care of her, though Rachel would do her best, I know. If she would like to have me, or if you think I could do any good, pray telegraph for me the instant you get this letter. I would have come this morning, only I thought, perhaps, she had her aunt. That stupid telegram never said whether her baby was alive, or what it was ; I do hope it is all right. I should like to send nurse up at once—I always thought she saved little Cyril when he was so ill. Pray send for nurse or me, or anything I can send : anyway, I know nobody can be such a comfort

as you ; but the only thing there is to wish about you is, that you could be in two places at once.

“ The two boys are gone in to the trial, they were very eager about it ; and dear Grace promises to take care of Conrade’s throat. Poor boys ! they had got up a triumphal arch for your return ; but I am afraid I am telling secrets. Dear Ermine is so good and resolutely composed—quite an example.—Yours affectionately,

“ F. G. TEMPLE.”

“ AVONCESTER, *August 3d, 2 p.m.*

“ MY DEAR COLONEL KEITH,—I am just come out of court, and I am to wait at the inn, for Aunt Ailie does not like for me to hear the trial, but she says I may write to you to pass away the time. I am sorry I left my letter out to go this morning, for Aunt Ailie says it is very undutiful to say anything about the sheep’s wool in Russia smelling of tobacco. Conrade says it is all smoking, and that every one does it who has seen the world. Papa never stops smoking but when he is with Aunt Ermine ; he sat on the box and did it all the way to Avonchester, and Mr. Beechum said it was to compose his mind. After we got to Avonchester we had a long, long time to wait, and first one was called, and then another, and then they wanted me. I was not nearly so frightened as I was that time when you sent for me, though there were so many more people ; but it was daylight, and the judge looked so kind, and the lawyer spoke so gently to me, and Mr. Maddox did not look horrid like that first time. I think he must be sorry now he has seen how much he has hurt papa. The lawyer asked me all about the noises, and the lions, and the letters of light, just as Mr. Grey did ;

and they showed me papa's old seal ring, and asked if I knew it, and a seal that was made with the new one that he got when the other was lost! and I knew them because I used to make impressions on my arms with them when I was a little girl. There was another lawyer that asked how old I was, and why I had not told before; and I thought he was going to laugh at me for a silly little girl, but the judge would not let him, and said I was a clear-headed little maiden; and Mr. Beechum came with Aunt Ailie, and took me out of court, and told me to choose anything in the whole world he should give me, so I chose the little writing case I am writing with now, and 'The Heroes' besides, so I shall be able to read till the others come back, and we go home.—Your affectionate little friend,

“ ROSE ERMINÉ WILLIAMS.”

“ THE HOMESTEAD, *August 3d, 9 p.m.*

“ MY DEAR ALEXANDER,—You made me promise to send you the full account of this day's proceedings, or I do not think I should attempt it, when you may be so sadly engaged. Indeed, I should hardly have gone to Avonchester had the sad intelligence reached me before I had set out, when I thought my sudden return would be a greater alarm to my mother, and I knew that dear Fanny would do all she could for her. Still she has had a very nervous day, thinking constantly of your dear sister, and of Rachel's alarm and inexperience; but her unlimited confidence in your care of Rachel is some comfort, and I am hoping that the alarm may have subsided, and you may be all rejoicing. I have always thought that, with dear Rachel, some new event or sensation would best efface the terrible memories of last spring. My

mother is now taking her evening nap, and I am using the time for telling you of the day's doings. I took with me Fanny's two eldest, who were very good and manageable ; and we met Mr. Grey, who put us in very good places, and told us the case was just coming on. You will see the report in detail in the paper, so I will only try to give you what you would not find there. I should tell you that Maddox has entirely dropped his *alias*. Mr. Grey is convinced that was only a bold stroke to gain time and prevent the committal, so as to be able to escape, and that he 'reckoned upon bullying a dense old country magistrate ;' but that he knew it was quite untenable before a body of unexceptionable witnesses. Altogether the man looked greatly altered and crest-fallen, and there was a meanness and vulgarity in his appearance that made me wonder at our ever having credited his account of himself. He had an abject look, very unlike his confident manner at the sessions, nor did he attempt his own defence. Mr. Grey kept on saying he must know that he had not a leg to stand upon.

"The counsel for the prosecution told the whole story, and it was very touching. I had never known the whole before ; the sisters are so resolute and uncomplaining : but how they must have suffered when every one thought them ruined by their brother's fraud ! I grieve to think how we neglected them, and only noticed them when it suited our convenience. Then he called Mr. Beechum, and you will understand better than I can all about the concern in which they were embarked, and Maddox coming to him for an advance of 300*l.*, giving him a note from Mr. Williams, asking for it to carry out an invention. The order for the sum was put into

Maddox's hands, and the banker proved the paying it to him by an order on a German bank.

“ Then came Mr. Williams. I had seen him for a moment in setting out, and was struck with his strange, lost, dreamy look. There is something very haggard and mournful in his countenance ; and, though he has naturally the same fine features as his eldest sister, his cheeks are hollow, his eyes almost glassy, and his beard, which is longer than the Colonel's, very grey. He gave me the notion of the wreck of a man, stunned and crushed, and never thoroughly alive again ; but when he stood in the witness-box, face to face with the traitor, he was very different ; he lifted up his head, his eyes brightened, his voice became clear, and his language terse and concentrated, so that I could believe in his having been the very able man he was described to be. I am sure Maddox must have quailed under his glance, there was something so loftily innocent in it, yet so wistful, as much as to say, ‘ how could you abuse my perfect confidence ? ’ Mr. Williams denied having received the money, written the letter, or even thought of making the request. They showed him the impression of two seals. He said one was made with a seal-ring given him by Colonel Keith, and lost some time before he went abroad ; the other, with one with which he had replaced it, and which he produced, he had always worn it on his finger. They matched exactly with the impressions ; and there was a little difference in the hair of the head upon the seal that was evident to every one. It amused the boys extremely to see some of the old jurymen peering at them with their glasses. He was asked where he was on the 7th of September (the date of the letter), and he referred to some notes of his own, which enabled him to state that on the 5th

he had come back to Prague from a village with a horrible Bohemian name—all cs and zs—which I will not attempt to write, though much depended on the number of the said letters.

“The rest of the examination must have been very distressing, for Maddox’s counsel pushed him hard about his reasons for not returning to defend himself, and he was obliged to tell how ill his wife was, and how terrified ; and they endeavoured to make that into an admission that he thought himself liable. They tried him with bits of the handwriting, and he could not always tell which were his own ;—but I think every one must have been struck with his honourable scrupulosity in explaining every doubt he had.

“Other people were called in about the writing, but Alison Williams was the clearest of all. She was never puzzled by any scrap they showed her, and, moreover, she told of Maddox having sent for her brother’s address, and her having copied it from a letter of Mrs. Williams’s, which she produced, with the wrong spelling, just as it was in the forgery. The next day had come a letter from the brother, which she showed, saying that they were going to leave the place sooner than they had intended, and spelling it right. She gave the same account of the seals, and nothing ever seemed to disconcert her. My boys were so much excited about their ‘own Miss Williams,’ that I was quite afraid they would explode into a cheer.

“That poor woman whom we used to call Mrs. Rawlins told her sad story next. She is much worn and subdued, and Mr. Grey was struck with the change from the fierce excitement she showed when she was first confronted with Maddox after her own trial ; but she held fast to the same evidence,

giving it not resentfully, but sadly and firmly, as if she felt it to be her duty. She, as you know, explained how Maddox had obtained access to Mr. Williams's private papers, and how she had, afterwards, found in his possession the seal ring, and the scraps of paper in his patron's writing. A policeman produced them, and the seal perfectly filled the wax upon the forged letter. The bits of paper showed that Maddox had been practising imitating Mr. Williams's writing. It all seemed most distinct, but still there was some sharp cross-examination of her on her own part in the matter, and Mr. Grey said it was well that little Rose could so exactly confirm the facts she mentioned.

"Poor, dear little Rose looked very sweet and innocent, and not so much frightened as at her first examination. She told her story of the savage way in which she had been frightened into silence. Half the people in the court were crying, and I am sure it was a mercy that she was not driven out of her senses, or even murdered that night. It seems that she was sent to bed early, but the wretches knowing that she always woke and talked while her mother was going to bed, the phosphoric letters were prepared to frighten her, and detain her in her room, and then Maddox growled at her when she tried to pass the door. She was asked how she knew the growl to be Maddox's, and she answered that she heard him cough. Rachel will, I am sure, remember the sound of that little dry cough. Nothing could make it clearer than that the woman had spoken the truth. The child identified the two seals with great readiness, and then was sent back to the inn that she might not be perplexed with hearing the defence. This, of course, was very trying to us all, since the best the counsel could do for his client

was to try to pick holes in the evidence, and make the most of the general acquiescence in Mr. Williams's guilt for all these years. He brought forward letters that showed that Mr. Williams had been very sanguine about the project, and had written about the possibility that an advance might be needed. Some of the letters, which both Mr. Williams and his sister owned to be in his own writing, spoke in most flourishing terms of his plans ; and it was proved by documents and witnesses that the affairs were in such a state that bankruptcy was inevitable, so that there was every motive for securing a sum to live upon. It was very miserable all the time this was going on ; the whole interpretation of Mr. Williams's conduct seemed to be so cruelly twisted aside, and it was what every one had all along believed, his absence was made so much of, and all these little circumstances that had seemed so important were held so cheap—one knew it was only the counsel's representation, and yet Alison grew whiter and whiter under it. I wish you could have heard the reply : drawing the picture of the student's absorption and generous confidence, and his agent's treachery, creeping into his household, and brutally playing on the terrors of his child.

“ Well, I cannot tell you all, but the judge summed up strongly for a conviction, though he said a good deal about culpable negligence almost inviting fraud, and I fear it must have been very distressing to the Williamses ; but the end was that Maddox was found guilty, and sentenced to fourteen years' penal servitude, though I am afraid they will not follow Conrade's suggestion, and chain up a lion by his bed every night of his life.

“ We were very happy when we met at the inn, and all shook hands. Dr. Long was, I think, the least at ease. He

had come in case this indictment had in any way failed, to bring his own matter forward, so that Maddox should not get off. I do not like him very much, he seemed unable to be really hearty, and I think he must have once been harsh and now ashamed of it. Then he was displeased at Colonel Keith's absence, and could hardly conceal how much he was put out by the cause, as if he thought the Colonel had imposed himself on the family as next heir. I hardly know how to send all this in the present state of things, but I believe you will wish to have it, and will judge how much Rachel will bear to hear. Good night.—Your affectionate Sister,

“GRACE CURTIS.”

“GOWANBRAE, AVONMOUTH, *August 3d, 11 P.M.*

“DEAR KEITH,—Before this day has ended you must have a few lines from the man whom your exertions have relieved from a stigma, the full misery of which I only know by the comfort of its removal. I told you there was much that could never be restored. I feel this all the more in the presence of all that now remains to me, but I did not know how much could still be given back. The oppression of the load of suspicion under which I laboured now seems to me to have been intolerable since I have been freed from it. I cannot describe how changed a man I have felt, since Beechum shook hands with me. The full blackness of Maddox's treachery I had not known, far less his cruelty to my child. Had I been aware of all I could not have refrained from trying to bring him to justice ; but there is no need to enter into the past. It is enough that I owe to you a freed spirit, and new life, and that my gratitude is not lessened by

the knowledge that something besides friendship urged you. Ermine is indeed as attractive as ever, and has improved in health far more than I durst expect. I suppose it is your all-powerful influence. You are first with all here, as you well deserve ; even my child, who is as lovely and intelligent as you told me, has every thought pervaded with 'the Colonel.' She is a sweet creature ; but there was one who will never be retraced, and forgive me, Keith, without her, even triumph must be bitterness.—Still ever most gratefully yours,

"EDWARD WILLIAMS."

"*August 3d, 11 p.m.*

"DEAREST COLIN,—The one sound in my ears, the one song of my heart is, 'Let them give thanks.' It is as if we had passed from a dungeon into sunshine. I suppose it would be too much if you were here to share it. They sent Rose in first to tell me, but I knew in the sound of their wheels that all was well. What an evening we have had, but I must not write more. Ailie is watching me like a dragon, and will not rest till I am in bed ; but I can't tell how to lose one minute of gladness in sleep. Oh, Colin, Colin, truest of all true knights, what an achievement yours has been!"

"*August 4th.*

"That was a crazy bit that I wrote last night, but I will not make away with it. I don't care how crazy you think me. It would have been a pity not to have slept to wake to the knowledge that all was not a dream, but then came the contrast with the sorrow you are watching. And I have just had your letter. What a sudden close to that joyous life ! She was one of the most winning beings, as you truly say, that ever flashed across one's course ; and if she had faults, they were

those of her day and her training. I suppose, by what you say, that she was too girlish to be all the companion your brother required, and that this may account for his being more shocked than sorrow-stricken ; and his child, since he can dwell on the thought, is such a new beginning of hope, that I wonder less than you do at his bearing up so well. Besides, pain dulls the feelings, and is a great occupation. I wish you could have seen that dear Bessie, but I gather that the end came on much more rapidly than had been expected. It seemed as if she were one of those to whom even suffering was strangely lightened and shortened, as if she had met only the flowers of life, and even the thorns and stings were almost lost in their bright blossoms. And she could hardly have lived on without much either of temptation or sorrow. I am glad of your testimony to Rachel's effectiveness, I wrote it out and sent it up to the Homestead. There was a note this morning requesting Edward to come in to see Maddox, and Ailie is gone with him, thinking she may get leave to see poor Maria. Think of writing 'Edward and Ailie' again ! Dr. Long and Harry are gone with them. The broken thread is better pieced by Harry than by the Doctor ; but he wants Ailie and me to go and stay at Belfast. Now I must hear Rose read, in order to bring both her and myself to our reasonable senses."

"5 P.M.

"They have been returned about an hour, and I must try to give you Edward's account of his interview. Maddox has quite dropped his mask, and seems to have been really touched by being brought into contact with Edward again, and, now it is all up with him, seemed to take a kind of pleasure in explaining the whole web, almost, Edward said,

with vanity at his own ingenuity. His earlier history was as he used to represent it to Edward. He was a respectable iron-monger's son, with a taste for art; he was not allowed to indulge it, and then came rebellion, and breaking away from home. He studied at the Academy for a few years, but wanted application, and fancied he had begun too late, tried many things and spent a shifty life, but never was consciously dishonest till after he had fallen in with Edward; and the large sums left uninquired for in his hands became a temptation to one already inclined to gambling. His own difficulties drove him on, and before he ventured on the grand stroke, he had been in a course of using the sums in his hands for his own purposes. The finding poor Maria open to the admiration he gave her beauty, put it into his head to make a tool of her; and this was not the first time he had used Edward's seal, or imitated his writing. No wonder there was such a confusion in the accounts as told so much against Edward. He told the particulars, Edward says, with the strangest mixture of remorse and exultation. At last came the journey to Bohemia, and his frauds became the more easy, until he saw there must be a bankruptcy, and made the last bold stroke, investing the money abroad in his own name, so that he would have been ready to escape if Edward had come home again. He never expected but that Edward would have returned, and finding the affairs hopeless, did this deed in order to have a resource. As to regret, he seemed to feel some when he said the effects had gone farther than he anticipated; but 'I could not let him get into that subject,' Edward said, and he soon came back to his amused complacency in his complete hoodwinking of all concerned at home, almost thanking Edward for the facilities his absence had

given him. After this, he went abroad, taking Maria lest she should betray him on being cast off; and they lived in such style at German gambling places that destitution brought them back again to England, where he could better play the lecturer, and the artist in search of subscriptions. Edward could not help smiling over some of his good stories, rather as 'the lord' may have 'commended the wisdom of his unjust steward.' Well, here he came, and, as he said, he really could hardly have helped himself; he had only to stand still and let poor Rachel deceive herself, and the whole concern was in a manner thrust upon him. He was always expecting to be able to get the main sum into his hands, as he obtained more confidence from Rachel, and the woodcuts were an over-bold stroke for the purpose; he had not intended her to keep or show them, but her ready credulity tempted him too far; and I cannot help laughing now at poor Edward's reproofs to us for having been all so easily cheated, now that he has been admitted behind the scenes. Maddox never suspected our neighbourhood, he had imagined us to be still in London, and though he heard Alison's name, he did not connect it with us. After all, what you thought would have been fatal to your hopes of tracing him, was really what gave him into our hands—Lady Temple's sudden descent upon their F. U. E. E. If he had not been so hurried and distressed as to be forced to leave Maria and the poor child to her fate, Maria would have held by him to the last and without her testimony where should we have been? But with a summons out against him, and hearing that Maria had been recognised, he could only fly to the place at Bristol that he thought unknown to Maria. Even when seized by the police, he did not know it was she who directed them, and had not expected her evidence till he actually saw and heard her on the night of the sessions. It was all Colonel

Keith's doing, he said ; every other adversary he would have despised, but your array of forces met him at every corner where he hoped to escape, and the dear little Rosie gave him check-mate, like a gallant little knight's pawn as she is. 'Who could have guessed that child would have such a confounded memory?' he said, for Edward had listened with a sort of interest that had made him quite forget that he was Rose's father, and that this wicked cunning Colonel was working in his cause. So off he goes to penal servitude, and Edward is so much impressed and touched with his sharpness as to predict that he will be the model prisoner before long, if he do not make his escape. As to poor Maria, that was a much more sad meeting, though perhaps less really melancholy, for there can be no doubt that she repents entirely ; she speaks of every one as being very good to her, and indeed the old influences only needed revival, they had never quite died out. Even that poor child's name was given for love of Ailie, and the perception of having been used to bring about her master's ruin had always preyed upon her, and further embittered her temper. The barbarity seemed like a dream in connexion with her, but, as she told Ailie, when she once began something came over her, and she could not help striking harder. It reminded me of horrible stories of the Hathertons' usage of animals. Enough of this. I believe the Sisterhood will find a safe shelter for her when her imprisonment is over, and that temptation will not again be put in her way. We should never have trusted her in poor dear Lucy's household. Rose calls for the letters. Good bye, dearest Colin and conqueror. I know all this will cheer you, for it is your own doing. I can't stop saying so, it is such a pleasant sound—Your own,

"E. W."

CHAPTER XIV.

VANITY OF VANITIES.

“ Unfaith in aught is want of faith in all.”

TENNYSON.

THE funeral was very quiet. By Colonel Keith's considerate arrangement the attendants met at Timber End, so that the stillness of the Parsonage was not invaded ; a measure the more expedient, as Alick was suffering from a return of his old enemy, intermitting fever, and only was able to leave his room in time to join the procession.

Many were present, for poor Bessie had been a general favourite, and her untimely fate had stirred up feelings that had created her into a saint upon earth ; but there was no one whose token of respect she would have more esteemed than Colonel Hammond's, who in all the bustle of the remove to Edinburgh had found time to come to Bishopton to do honour to the daughter of his old commanding officer. A flush of gratitude came over Alick's pale face when he became aware of his colonel's presence, and when the choristers' hymn had pealed low and sweetly over the tranquil meadows, and the mourners had turned away, Alick paused at the Parsonage gate to hold out his hand, and bring in this one guest to hear how near to Bessie's heart the father's Highland regiment had been in all the wanderings of her last moments.

The visit was prolonged for nearly an hour, while recollections of Alick's parents were talked over, and Rachel thought him more cheered and gratified than by any other tribute that had been paid to his sister. He was promised an extension of leave, if it were required on account of Lord Keith's state, though under protest that he would have the aguish fever as long as he remained overlooking the water meadows, and did not put himself under Dr. M'Vicar. Through these meadows Colonel Hammond meant to walk back to the station, and Alick and Rachel conducted him far enough to put him into the right path, and in going back again, they could not but go towards the stile leading to that corner of the churchyard where the sexton had finished his work, and smoothed the sods over that new grave.

Some one was standing at the foot—not the sexton—but a young man bending as with an intolerable load of grief. Rachel saw him first, when Alick was helping her down the step, and her start of dismay made him turn and look round. His brow contracted, and she clutched his arm with an involuntary cry of, “Oh, don’t,” but he, with a gesture that at once awed and tranquillized her, unclasped her hold and put her back, while he stepped forward.

She could hear every word, though his voice was low and deep with emotion. “Carleton, if I have ever been harsh or unjust in my dealings towards you, I am sorry for it. We have both had the saddest of all lessons. May we both take it as we ought.”

He wrung the surprised and unwilling hand, and before the youth, startled and overcome, had recovered enough to attempt a reply, he had come back to Rachel, resumed her arm, and crossed the churchyard, still shivering and trem-

bling with the agitation, and the force he had put on himself. Rachel neither could nor durst speak ; she only squeezed his hand, and when he had shut himself up in his own room, she could not help repairing to his uncle, and telling him the whole. Mr. Clare's "God bless you, my boy," had double meaning in it that night.

Not long after, Alick told Rachel of his having met poor young Carleton in the meadows, pretending to occupy himself with his fishing-rod, but too wretched to do anything. And in a short time Mrs. Carleton again called to pour out to Mrs. Keith her warm thanks to the Captain, for having roused her son from his moody, unmanageable despair, and made him consent to accept a situation in a new field of labour, in a spirit of manful duty that he had never evinced before.

This was a grave and subdued, but not wholly mournful, period at Bishopsworthy—a time very precious to Rachel in the retrospect—though there was much to render it anxious. Alick continued to suffer from recurrences of the fever, not very severe in themselves after the first two or three, but laying him prostrate with shivering and headache every third day, and telling heavily on his strength and looks when he called himself well. On these good days he was always at Timber End, where his services were much needed. Lord Keith liked and esteemed him as a sensible prudent young man, and his qualities as a first-rate nurse were of great assistance to the Colonel. Lord Keith's illness was tedious and painful ; the necessity of a dangerous operation became increasingly manifest, but the progress towards such a crisis was slow and the pain and discomfort great ; the patient never moved beyond his dressing-room, and needed incessant

attention to support his spirits and assist his endeavours to occupy himself. It was impossible to leave him for long together, and Colonel Keith was never set at liberty for exercise or rest except when Alick came to his assistance, and fortunately this young brother-in-law was an especial favourite, partly from Lord Keith's esteem for his prudence, partly from his experience in this especial species of suffering. At any rate the days of Alick's enforced absence were always times of greater restlessness and uneasiness at Timber End.

Meantime Rachel was constantly thrown with Mr. Clare, supplying Alick's place to him, and living in a round of duties that suited her well, details of parish work, walking with, writing for, and reading to Mr. Clare, and reaping much benefit from intercourse with such a mind. Many of her errors had chiefly arisen from the want of some one whose superiority she could feel, and her old presumptions withered up to nothing when she measured her own powers with those of a highly educated man, while all the time he gave her thanks and credit for all she had effected, but such as taught her humility by very force of infection.

Working in earnest at his visitation sermon, she was drawn up into the real principles and bearings of the controversy, and Mr. Clare failed not to give full time and patience to pick out all her difficulties, removing scruples at troubling him, by declaring that it was good for his own purpose to unwind every tangle even if he did not use every thread. It was wonderful how many puzzles were absolutely intangible, not even tangled threads, but a sort of nebulous matter that dispersed itself on investigation. And after all, unwilling as she would have been to own it, a woman's tone of thought is commonly moulded by the masculine intellect, which, under

one form or another, becomes the master of her soul. Those opinions, once made her own, may be acted and improved upon, often carried to lengths never thought of by their inspirer, or held with noble constancy and perseverance even when he himself may have fallen from them, but from some living medium they are almost always adopted, and thus, happily for herself, a woman's efforts at scepticism are but blind faith in her chosen leader, or, at the utmost, in the spirit of the age. And Rachel having been more than usually removed from the immediate influence of superior man, had been affected by the more feeble and distant power, a leading that appeared to her the light of her independent mind ; but it was not in the nature of things that, from her husband and his uncle, her character should not receive that tincture for which it had so long waited, strong and thorough in proportion to her nature, not rapid in receiving impressions, but steadfast and uncompromising in retaining and working on them when once accepted, a nature that Alick Keith had discerned and valued amid its worst errors far more than mere attractiveness, of which his sister had perhaps made him weary and distrustful. Nor, indeed, under the force of the present influences, was attractiveness wanting, and she suited Alick's peculiarities far better than many a more charming person would have done, and his uncle, knowing her only by her clear mellow voice, her consideration, helpfulness, and desire to think and do rightly, never understood the doubtful amazement now and then expressed in talking of Alick's choice. One great bond between Rachel and Mr. Clare was affection for the little babe, who continued to be Rachel's special charge, and was a great deal dearer to her already than all the seven Temples

put together. She studied all the books on infant management that she could obtain, constantly listened for his voice, and filled her letters to her mother with questions and details on his health, and descriptions of his small person. Alick was amused whenever he glanced at his strong-minded woman's correspondence, and now and then used to divert himself with rousing her into emphatic declarations of her preference of this delicate little being to "great, stout, coarse creatures that people call fine children." In fact, Alick's sensitive tenderness towards his sister's motherless child took the form of avoiding the sight of it, and being ironical when it was discussed ; but with Mr. Clare, Rachel was sure of sympathy, ever since the afternoon when he had said how the sounds upstairs reminded him of his own little daughter ; and sitting under the yew-tree, he had told Rachel all the long stored-up memories of the little life that had been closed a few days after he had first heard himself called papa by the baby lips. He had described all these events calmly, and not without smiles, and had said how his own blindness had made him feel thankful that he had safely laid his little Una on her mother's bosom under the church's shade ; but when Rachel spoke of this conversation to her husband, she learnt that it was the first time that he had ever talked of those buried hopes. He had often spoken of his wife, but though always fond of children, few who had not read little Una's name beneath her mother's cross, knew that he was a childless father. And yet it was beautiful to see the pleasure he took in the touch of Bessie's infant, and how skilfully and tenderly he would hold it, so that Rachel in full faith averred that the little Alexander was never so happy as with him. The chief alarms came from Mrs.

Comyn Menteith, who used to descend on the Rectory like a whirlwind, when the Colonel had politely expelled her from her father's room at Timber End. Possessed with the idea of Rachel's being very dull at Bishopsworthy, she sedulously enlivened her with melancholy prognostics as to the life, limbs, and senses of the young heir, who would never live, poor little darling, even with the utmost care of herself and her nurse, and it was very perverse of papa and the doctors still to keep him from her—poor little darling—not that it mattered, for he was certain not to thrive, wherever he was, and the Gowanbrae family would end with Uncle Colin and the glassblower's daughter; a disaster on which she met with such condolence from Alick (N.B. the next heir) that Rachel was once reduced to the depths of genuine despair by the conviction that his opinion of his nephew's life was equally desponding; and another time was very angry with him for not defending Ermine's gentility. She had not entirely learnt what Alick's assent might mean.

Once, when Mrs. Menteith had been besetting her father with entreaties for the keys of Lady Keith's private possessions, she was decisively silenced, and the next day these same keys were given to Alick, with a request that his wife would as soon as possible look over and take to herself all that had belonged to his sister, except a few heirloom jewels that must return to Scotland. Alick demurred greatly, but the old man would not brook contradiction, and Rachel was very unwillingly despatched upon the mission on one of Alick's days of prostration at home. His absence was the most consoling part of this sad day's work. Any way it could not be otherwise than piteous to dismantle what had been lately so bright and luxurious, and the contrast of the

present state of things with that in which these dainty new wedding presents had been brought together, could not but give many a pang ; but beside this, there was a more than ordinary impression of “vanity of vanities, all is vanity,” very painful to affection that was striving to lose the conviction that it had been a self-indulgent, plausible life. The accumulation of expensive trinkets and small luxuries, was as surprising as perplexing to a person of Rachel’s severely simple and practical tastes. It was not only since the marriage ; for Bessie had always had at her disposal means rather ample, and had used them not exactly foolishly, but evidently for her own gratification. Everything had some intrinsic worth, and was tasteful or useful, but the multitude was perfectly amazing, and the constant echo in Rachel’s ears was, “he heapeth up riches and cannot tell who shall gather them.” Lord Keith could hardly have found an executrix for his poor young wife, to whom her properties would have done so little harm. Rachel set many aside for the cousins, and for Mrs. Menteith, others she tried to persuade the Colonel to call Gowanbrae belongings, and failing in this, she hoped through Grace, to smuggle some of them into *his* Gowanbrae ; but when all was done, there was a mass of things that Lord Keith never wished to see again, and that seemed to Rachel to consist of more ornaments than she could ever wear, and more knick-knacks than a captain’s wife could ever carry about with her.

She was putting aside the various packets of letters and papers to be looked over more at leisure, when the Colonel knocked at the morning-room door, and told her that his brother would like to see her, when her work was done. “But first,” he said, “I must ask you to be kind enough to

look over some of these papers, and try to find receipts for some of these bills."

"Here they are," said Rachel; "I was going to look them over at home."

"If you have time to examine them here with me," said Colonel Keith, gently, "I think it might save Alick some pain and vexation."

Rachel was entirely unaware of his meaning, and supposed he only thought of the mere thrilling of the recent wound; but when he sat down and took a long account out of a tradesman's envelope, a chill of dismay came over her, followed by a glow of hope as she recollected a possible explanation: "Have these wretched tradesmen been sending in bills over again at such a time as this?" she exclaimed.

"I should be very glad to find their receipts," returned the Colonel.

They opened the most business-like looking bundles, all of them, though neatly kept, really in hopeless confusion. In vain was the search, and notes came forth which rendered it but too plain that there had been a considerable amount of debt even before the marriage, and that she had made partial payments and promises of clearing all off gradually, but that her new expenses were still growing upon her, and the few payments "on account," since she had been Lady Keith, by no means tallied with the amount of new purchases and orders. No one had suspected her money matters of being in disorder, and Rachel was very slow to comprehend; her simple, country life had made her utterly unaware of the difficulties and ways and means of a young lady of fashion. Even the direct evidence before her eyes would not at first

persuade her that it was not “all those wicked tradesmen ;” she had always heard that fashionable shops were not to be trusted.

“ I am afraid,” said Colonel Keith, “ that the whole can scarcely be shifted on the tradesmen. I fear poor Bessie was scarcely free from blame in this matter.”

“ Not paying ! Going on in debt ! Oh she could not have meant it ;” said Rachel, still too much astonished to understand. “ Of course one hears of gay, thoughtless people doing such things, but Bessie—who had so much thought and sense. It must be a mistake ! Can’t you go and speak to the people ?”

“ It is very sad and painful to make such discoveries,” said Colonel Keith ; “ but I am afraid such things are not uncommon in the set she was too much thrown amongst.”

“ But she knew so well—she was so superior ; and with Alick and her uncle to keep her above them,” said Rachel ; “ I cannot think she could have done such things.”

“ I could not *think*, but I see it was so,” said Colonel Keith, gravely. “ As I am obliged to understand these things, she must have greatly exceeded her means, and have used much cleverness and ingenuity in keeping the tradesmen quiet, and preventing all from coming to light.”

“ How miserable ! I can’t fancy living in such a predicament.”

“ I am much afraid,” added the Colonel, looking over the papers, “ that it explains the marriage—and then Keith did not allow her as much as she expected.”

“ Oh, Colonel Keith, don’t !” cried Rachel ; “ it is just the one thing where I could not bear to believe Alick. She was so dear and beautiful, and spoke so rightly.”

“To believe Alick!” repeated the Colonel, as Rachel’s voice broke down.

“I thought—I ought not to have thought—he was hard upon her—but he knew better,” said Rachel; “of course he did not know of all this dreadful business!”

“Assuredly not,” said the Colonel, “that is self-evident; but as you say, I am afraid he did know his poor sister’s character better than we did, when he came to warn me against the marriage.”

“Did he? Oh how much it must have cost him.”

“I am afraid I did not make it cost him less. I thought he judged her harshly, and that his illness had made him magnify trifles, but though our interference would have been perfectly useless, he was quite right in his warning. Now that, poor thing, she is no longer here to enchant us with her witcheries, I see that my brother greatly suffered from being kept away from home, and detained in this place, and that she left him far more alone than she ought to have done.”

“Yes, Alick thought so, but she had such good reasons; I am sure she believed them herself.”

“If she had not believed them, she could not have had such perfect sincerity of manner,” said the Colonel; “she must have persuaded at least one half of herself that she was acting for every one’s good except her own.”

“And Mr. Clare, whom Alick always thought she neglected, never felt it. Alick says he was too unselfish to claim attention.”

“I never doubted her for one moment till I came home, on that unhappy day, and found how ill Keith was. I did think then, that considering how much she had seen of Alick while the splinters were working out, she ought to have

known better than to talk of sciatica ; but she made me quite believe in her extreme anxiety, and that she was only going out because it was necessary for her to take care of you on your first appearance. How bright she looked, and how little I thought I should never see her again !”

“ Oh, she meant what she said ! She always was kind to me ! Most kind !” repeated Rachel ; “ so considerate about all the dreadful spring—not one word did she say to vex me about the past ! I am sure she did go out on that day as much to shelter me as for anything else. I can’t bear to think all this—here in this pretty room that she had such pleasure in ; where she made me so welcome, after all my disagreeableness and foolishness.”

The Colonel could almost have said, “ Better such foolishness than such wisdom, such repulsion than such attraction.” He was much struck by Rachel’s distress, and the absence of all female spite and triumph, made him understand Ermine’s defence of her as really large-minded and generous.

“ It is a very sad moment to be undeceived,” he said ; “ one would rather have one’s faults come to light in one’s life than afterwards.”

They were simple words, so simple that the terrible truth with which they were connected, did not come upon Rachel at the first moment ; but as if to veil her agitation, she drew towards her a book, an ivory-bound Prayer-book, full of illuminations, of Bessie’s own doing, and her eye fell upon the awful verse, “ So long as thou doest well unto thyself, men will speak good of thee.” It was almost more than Rachel could bear, sitting in the midst of the hoards, for which poor Bessie had sold herself. She rose up, with a sob of oppressive grief, and broke out, “ Oh ! at least it is a comfort that Alick was

really the kindest and rightest ! Only too right ! but you can settle all this without him," she added imploringly ; "need he know of this ? I can't bear that he should."

"Nor I," said Colonel Keith, "it was the reason that I am glad you are here alone."

"Oh, thank you ! No one need ever know," added Rachel.

"I fear my brother must see the accounts, as they have to be paid, but that need not be immediately."

"Is there anything else that is dreadful ?" said Rachel, looking at the remaining papers, as if they were a nest of adders. "I don't like to take them home now, if they will grieve Alick."

"You need not be afraid of that packet," said the Colonel ; "I see his father's handwriting. They look like his letters from India."

Rachel looked into one or two, and her face lighted up. "Oh !" she exclaimed, "this is enough to make up for all. This is his letter to tell about Alick's wound. Oh how beautifully he speaks of him," and Rachel, with no voice to read, handed the thin paper to her companion, that he might see the full commendation, that had been wrung from the reserved father's heart by his son's extremity.

"You must be prepared to hear that all is over," wrote the father to his daughter ; "in fact, I doubt whether he can live till morning, though M'Vicar declares that nothing vital has been touched. Be it as it may, the boy has been in all respects, even more than I dared to wish, and the comfort he has been ever since he came out to me has been unspeakable. We must not grudge him such a soldier's death after his joyous life. But for you, my poor girl, I could only wish the same for myself to-morrow. You will, at least, if you

lose a brother's care, have a memory of him, to which to live up. The thought of such a dead brother will be more to you than many a living one can ever be to a sister."

Rachel's heart beat high, and her eyes were full of tears of exultation. And the Colonel was well pleased to compensate for all the pain he had inflicted by giving her all the details he could recollect of her husband's short campaign. They had become excellent friends over their mournful work, and were sorry to have their *tête-à-tête* interrupted when a message was brought that his Lordship was ready, if Mrs. Keith would be so good as to come into his sitting-room.

She wiped away the tears, and awe-struck and grave, followed the Colonel; a great contrast to Lord Keith's more frequent lady-visitor, as she silently received the polished greeting, its peculiar stateliness of courtesy, enhanced by the feeble state of the shattered old man, unable to rise from his pillowed chair, and his face deeply lined by suffering. He would not let her give him any account of her labours, nor refer any question to him, he only entreated that everything might be taken away, and that he might hear nothing about it. He spoke warmly of Alick's kindness and attention, and showed much solicitude about his indisposition, and at last he inquired for Rachel's "little charge," hoping he was not clamorous or obnoxious to her, or to Mr. Clare's household. Her eager description of his charms provoked a look of interest and a sad smile, followed by a request, that weather and doctor permitting, she would bring the child to be seen for a few minutes. The next day there was an appointment, at which both the Colonel and Alick were wanted, but on the following one, the carriage should be sent to bring her and the little one to Timber End.

The effect of this invitation amused Alick. The first thing he heard in the morning was a decided announcement from Rachel that she must go up to London to procure equipments for the baby to be presented in !

“ You know I can’t go with you to-day.”

“ Of course, but I must make him fit to be seen. You know he has been wearing little Una’s things all this time, and that will not do out of the nursery.”

“ A superior woman ought to know that his Lordship will never find out what his son has on.”

“ Then it is all the more reason that I should not let the poor dear little fellow go about wrapped up in somebody’s old shawl !”

“ What will you do then—take your maid ?”

“ Certainly not. I can’t have him left.”

“ Then take him with you ?”

“ What, Alick, a little unvaccinated baby ! Where have you ever lived ? I don’t see the least reason why I should not go alone.”

“ You need not begin beating about the world yet, Rachel. How many times did you say you had been in London ?”

“ Three ; once with my father when I was a child, once in the time of the Great Exhibition, and passing through it now with you. But any one of common sense can manage.”

“ If you will wait till five o’clock I will come with you,” said Alick, wearily.

“ No, indeed, I had rather not go, than that you should ; you are quite tired out enough at the end of the day.”

“ Then do not go.”

“ Alick, why will you have no proper feeling for that poor dear child ?” said Rachel with tears in her eyes.

If he winced he did not show it. "My proper feeling takes the direction of my wife," he said.

"You don't really mean to forbid me to go," she exclaimed.

"I don't *mean* it, for I do so, unless you find some one to go with you."

It was the first real collision that had taken place, but Alick's quiet, almost languid tone had an absolute determination in it from the very absence of argument; and Rachel, though extremely annoyed, felt the uselessness of battling the point. She paused for a few moments, then said with an effort, "May I take the housekeeper?"

"Yes, certainly," and then he added some advice about taking a brougham, and thus lightened her heart; so that she presently said humbly,

"Have I been self-willed and overbearing, Alick?"

He laughed. "Not at all; you have persevered just where you ought. I dare say this is all more essential than shows on the surface. And," he added, with a shaken voice, "if you were not myself, Rachel, you know how I should thank you for caring for my poor Bessie's child." He was gone almost as he spoke the words, but Rachel still felt the kiss and the hot tears that had fallen on her face.

Mr. Clare readily consented to spare his housekeeper, but the housekeeper was untoward, she was "busied in her housewife skep," and would not stir. Alick was gone to Timber End, and Rachel was just talking of getting the schoolmaster's wife as an escort, when Mr. Clare said—

"Pray are you above accepting my services?"

"You! Oh, uncle; thank you, but——"

"What were your orders? Anybody with you, was it not? I flatter myself that I have some *body*, at least."

“If Alick will not think I ought not !”

“The boy will not presume to object to what I do with you.”

“I do wish it very much,” said candid Rachel.

“Of course you do, my dear. Alick is not cured of a young man’s notion that babies are a sort of puppies. He is quite right not to let you run about London by yourself, but he will be quite satisfied if you find eyes and I find discretion.”

“But is it not very troublesome to you ?”

“It is a capital lark !” said Mr. Clare, with a zest that only the slang word could imply, removing all Rachel’s scruples ; and in effect Mr. Clare did enjoy the spice of adventure in a most amusing way. He knew perfectly well how to manage, laid out the plan of operations, gave orders to the driver, went into all the shops, and was an effective assistant in the choice of material and even of embroidery. His touch and ear seemed to do more for him than many men’s eyes do for them ; he heard odd scraps of conversation and retailed them with so much character ; he had such pleasant colloquies with all in whose way he fell, and so thoroughly enjoyed the flow and babble of the full stream of life, that Rachel marvelled that the seclusion of his parsonage was bearable to him. He took her to lunch with an old friend, a lady who had devoted herself to the care of poor girls to be trained as servants, and Rachel had the first real sight of one of the many great and good works set on foot by personal and direct labour.

“If I had been sensible, I might have come to something like this !” she said.

“Do you wish to undo these last three months ?”

“No ; I am not fit to be anything but an ordinary married woman, with an Alick to take care of me ; but I am glad some people can be what I meant to be.”

“And you need not regret not being useful *now*,” said Mr. Clare. “Where should any of us be without you ?”

It had not occurred to Rachel, but she was certainly of far more positive use in the world at the present moment than ever she had been in her most assuming maiden days.

Little Alexander was arrayed in all that could enhance his baby dignity, and Rachel was more than ever resolved to assert his superiority over “great frightful fine children,” resenting vehemently an innocent observation from Alick, that the small features and white skin promised sandiness of hair. Perhaps Alick delighted in saying such things for the sake of proving the ‘very womanhood’ of his Clever Woman.

Rachel hung back, afraid of the presentation, and would have sent her maid into the room with the child if Colonel Keith had not taken her in himself. Even yet she was not dexterous in handling the baby ; her hands were both occupied, and her attention absorbed, and she could not speak, she felt it so mournful to show this frail motherless creature to a father more like its grandfather, and already almost on the verge of the grave. She came up to Lord Keith, and held the child to him in silence. He said, “Thank you,” and kissed not only the little one, but her own brow, and she kept the tears back with difficulty.

Colonel Keith gave her a chair and footstool, and she sat with the baby on her lap, while very few words were spoken. It was the Colonel who asked her to take off the hood that

hid the head and brow, and who chiefly hazarded opinions as to likeness and colour of eyes. Lord Keith looked earnestly and sadly, but hardly made any observation, except that it looked healthier than he had been led to expect. He was sure it owed much to Mrs. Keith's great care and kindness.

Rachel feared he would not be able to part with his little son, and began to mention the arrangements she had contemplated in case he wished to keep the child at Timber End. On this, Lord Keith asked with some anxiety, if its presence were inconvenient to Mr. Clare; and being assured of the contrary, said, "Then while you are so kind as to watch over him, I much prefer that things should remain in their present state, than to bring him to a house like this. You do not object?"

"Oh, no; I am so glad. I was only dreading the losing him. I thought Mrs. Menteith wished for him when he is old enough to travel."

"Colin!" said Lord Keith, looking up sharply, "will nothing make the Menteiths understand that I would rather put out the child to nurse in a Highland hut than in that Babel of a nursery of theirs?"

Colin smiled and said, "Isabel does not easily accept an answer she dislikes."

"But remember, both of you," continued Lord Keith, "that happen what may, this poor child is not to be in her charge. I've seen enough of her children left alone in perambulators in the sun. You will be in Edinburgh?" he added, turning to Rachel.

"Yes, when Alick's leave ends."

“I shall return thither when this matter is over, I know I shall be better at home in Scotland, and if I winter in Edinburgh, may be we could make some arrangement for his being still under your eye.”

Rachel went home more elevated than she had been for months past.

CHAPTER XV.

AT LAST.

“ I bid thee hail, not as in former days,
Not as my chosen only, but my bride,
My very bride, coming to make my house
A glorious temple.” A. H. HALLAM.

“ *Timber End, Littleworthy, September 10th.*

“ DEAR MISS WILLIAMS,—I must begin by entreating your forgiveness for addressing you in a manner for which perhaps you may be unprepared ; but I trust you have always been aware, that any objections that I may have offered to my brother Colin’s attachment to yourself have never been personal, or owing to anything but an unfortunate complication of circumstances. These difficulties are, as no doubt he will explain to you, in great measure removed by the present condition of my family, which will enable me to make such settlements as I could wish in the case of one so nearly connected with me ; so that I am enabled to entreat of you at length to reward the persevering constancy so well deserved. I have a further, and a personal cause for wishing that the event should not be deferred, as regard for my feelings might have led you to propose. You are aware of the present state of my health, and that it has become expedient to make immediate arrangements for the future guardianship of my little boy. His uncles are of course his natural guardians,

and I have unbounded confidence in both ; but Alexander Keith's profession renders it probable that he may not always be at hand, and I am therefore desirous of being able to nominate yourself, together with my brother, among the personal guardians. Indeed, I understand from Alexander Keith, that such was the express wish of his sister. I mention this as an additional motive to induce you to consent. For my own part, even without so stringent a cause, all that I have ever seen or known of yourself would inspire me with the desire that you should take a mother's place towards my son. But you must be aware that such an appointment could only be made when you are already one of the family, and this it is that leads me to entreat you to overlook any appearance of precipitancy on my brother's part, and return a favourable reply to the request, which with my complete sanction, he is about to address to you.

“Yes, Ermine Williams, forgive all that is past, and feel for an old, it may be, a dying man, and for a motherless infant. There is much to forget, but I trust to your overcoming any scruples, and giving me all the comfort in your power, in thinking of the poor child who has come into the world under such melancholy circumstances.

“Yours most truly,

“KEITH OF GOWANBRAE.”

“Poor Keith, he has given me his letter open, his real anxiety has been too much at last for his dignity ; and now, my Ermine, what do you say to his entreaty ? The state of the case is this. How soon this abscess may be ready for the operation is still uncertain, the surgeons think it will be in about three weeks, and in this interval he wishes to complete all

his arrangements. In plain English, his strongest desire is to secure the poor little boy from falling into Menteith's hands. Now, mine is a precarious life, and Alick and Rachel may of course be at the ends of the earth, so the point is that you shall be 'one of the family,' before the will is signed. Alick's leave has been extended to the 1st of October, no more is possible, and he undertakes to nurse poor Keith for a fortnight from to-morrow, if you will consent to fulfil this same request within that time. After the 1st, I should have to leave you, but as soon as Keith is well enough to bear the journey, he wishes to return to Edinburgh, where he would be kindly attended to by Alick and Rachel all the winter. There, Ermine, your victory is come, your consent has been entreated at last by my brother, not for my sake, but as a personal favour to himself, because there is no woman in the world of whom he thinks so highly. For myself I say little. I grieve that you should be thus hurried and fluttered, and if Ailie thinks it would harm you, she must telegraph back to me not to come down, and I will try to teach myself patience by preaching it to Keith, but otherwise you will see me by four o'clock to-morrow. Every time I hear Rachel's name, I think it ought to have been yours, and surely in this fourteenth year, lesser objections may give way. But persuasions are out of the question, you must be entirely led by your own feeling. If I could have seen you in July, this should not have come so suddenly at last.

"Yours, more than ever, decide as you may,

"COLIN A. KEITH.

"P.S.—I am afraid Rose would hardly answer this purpose equally well."

Colonel Keith followed his letter at four o'clock, and entering his own study, found it in a cloud of smoke, in the midst of which he dimly discerned a long beard and thin visage absorbed in calculation.

“Edward! How is Ermine?”

“Oh?” (inquiringly) “Keith!” (as taken by surprise)
“ah! you were to come home to-day. How are you?”

“How is she? Has she had my letter?”

“What letter? You write every day, I thought.”

“The letter of yesterday. Have you heard nothing of it?”

“Not that I know of. Look here, Keith, I told you I was sure the platinum——”

“Your brain is becoming platinum. I must go,” and the chemist remained with merely a general impression of having been interrupted.

Next the Colonel met Rose, watching at his own gate, and this time his answer was more explicit.

“Yes, Aunt Ermine said you were coming, and that I might meet you, but that I must let you come in alone, for she had not seen you so long, that she wanted you all to herself.”

“And how is she; how has she been?”

“She is well now,” said Rose, in the grave, grown-up way she always assumed when speaking of her aunt’s health; “but she has been having a good deal of her nervous headache this summer, and Lady Temple wanted her to see Mr. Frampton, but Aunt Ailie said it was only excitement and wear of spirits. Oh, I am glad you have come back! We have so wearied after you.”

Nevertheless Rose dutifully loosed the hand to which she

had been clinging till they came to the door ; and as Colin Keith opened it, again he was met by the welcoming glances of the bright eyes. This time he did not pause till he was close to her, and kneeling on one knee beside her, he put his arm round her, and held her hands in his.

The first words that passed were, “ You had the letters ? ”

“ Colin, Colin, my one prayer has been, ‘ Make Thy way plain before my face.’ ”

“ And now it is ? ”

“ The suspicion is gone ; the displeasure is gone ; the doubts are gone ; and now there is nothing—nothing but the lameness and the poverty ; and if you like the old cinder, Colin, that is your concern ; ” and she hid her face, with a sort of sobbing laugh.

“ And even the haste ; you consent to that ? ”

“ I don’t feel it like haste,” she said, looking up with a smile, and then crimsoning.

“ And Ailie gives leave, and thinks the hurry will not harm you ? ”

“ Ailie ! O Colin, did you think I could tell any one of your letter, before you had had your answer ? ”

“ Then Edward is not so moonstruck as I thought him ! And when shall it be, dearest ? Give me as much time as you can. I must go back this day fortnight.”

“ I suppose your expectations are not high in the matter of finery,” said Ermine, with a certain archness of voice.

“ Those eyes are all the finery I ever see.”

“ Then if you will not be scandalized at my natural Sunday dress, I don’t see why this day week should not do as well as any other time.”

"Ermine, you are the only woman I ever met totally free from nonsense."

"Take care, it is very unfeminine and disagreeable to be devoid of nonsense."

"Very, and therefore you are talking it now! Ermine, how shall I thank you? Not only for the sake of the ease of mind to my poor brother; but in the scenes we are going through, a drop of happiness is wanted as a stimulant. When I looked at the young couple at Bishopsworthy, I often felt as if another half-year of suspense was more than I could bear, and that I must ask you to help me through with at least a definite hope."

"Ah! you have gone through a great deal. I am sure it has been a time of great trouble."

"Indeed it has. The suffering has become unceasing and often most severe, and there is grievous depression of spirits; I could not have left him even for a day, if he had not been so fervently bent on this."

"Is he feeling his loss more acutely than at first?"

"Not so much that, as for the poor little boy, who is a heavy burthen on his mind. He has lived in such a state of shrewd distrust that he has no power of confidence, and his complications for making all the boy's guardians check one another till we come to a dead lock, and to make provision for Isabel out of Menteith's reach, are enough to distract the brain of a man in health."

"Is he fond of the child?"

"It is an oppressive care to him, and he only once has made up his mind to see it, though it is never off his mind, and it is very curious how from the first he has been resolved

on your taking charge of it. It is the most real testimony he could give you."

"It is very comfortable not to be brought in like an enemy in spite of him, as even a year ago I could have been proud to do."

"And I to have brought you," he answered, "but it is far better as it is. He is very cordial, and wants to give up the Auchinvar estate to me; indeed, he told me that he always meant me to have it as soon as I had washed my hands of you—you wicked syren—but I think you will agree with me that he had better leave it to his daughter Mary, who has nothing. We never reckoned on it."

"Nor on anything else," said Ermine, smiling.

"You have never heard my ways and means," he said, "and as a prudent woman you ought, you know. See," taking out his tablets, "here is my calculation."

"All that!"

"On the staff in India there were good opportunities of saving; then out of that sum I bought the house, and with my half-pay, our income will be very fair, and there would be a pension afterwards for you. This seems to me all we can reasonably want."

"Unless I became like *die Ilsebill* in the German tale. After four years of living from hand to mouth, this will be like untold gold. To wish to be above strict economy in wheeled chairs has seemed like perilous discontent in Rose and me."

"I have ventured on the extravagance of taking the ponies and little carriage off my brother's hands, it is low enough for you, and I shall teach Rose to ride one of the ponies with me."

"The dear little Rose! But, Colin, there is a dreadful

whisper about her going with her father, and Ailie too ! You see now his character is cleared, he has been offered a really lucrative post, so that he could have them with him."

"Does he wish it ?"

"I dare not ask. I must be passive or I shall be selfish. You are all my world, and Edward has no one. Make them settle it without me. Talk of something else ! Tell me how your brother is to be taken care of."

"There cannot be a better nurse than Alick Keith ; and Ferguson, the agent, is there, getting directions from Keith whenever he can bear it. I am best out of the way of all that. I have said once for all that I will do anything for them except live at Gowanbrae, and I am sick of demonstrating that the poor child's existence is the greatest possible relief to me ; and I hope now not to go back till the whole is settled and done with."

"You look regularly worn out with the discussions !"

"It was an endless business ! The only refreshment was in now and then getting over to Bishopsworthy."

"What ? to Rachel ?" said Ermine archly.

"Rachel is showing to great advantage. I did not think it was in her to be so devoted to the child, and it is beautiful to see her and Mr. Clare together."

"There's a triumph," said Ermine, smiling. "Do you grant that the happy medium is reached, that Alick should learn to open his eyes and Rachel to shut hers ?"

"Well ! Her eyes are better, but he, poor lad, has been in no spirits to open his very wide. The loss of his sister went very deep, and those aguish attacks, though they become much slighter, make him look wretchedly ill. I should have doubted about leaving him in charge in his

present state, but that he was urgent on me, and he is spared all the night nursing. Any way, I must not leave him longer than I can help. I may have one week with you at home—at our home, Ermine."

"And let us make the most of that," said Ermine, quickly.

Meanwhile Alison, sore and sick at heart, wandered on the esplanade, foreboding that the blow was coming that she ought to rejoice at, if her love could only be more unselfish. At last the Colonel joined her, and, as usual, his tone of consideration cheered and supported her when in actual conference with him, and as he explained his plans, he added that he hoped there would be scarcely any interruption to her intercourse with her sister.

"You know," she said abruptly, "that we could go to Ekaterinburg."

"And what is your feeling about it? Remember, Ailie, that I am your brother too." And as she hesitated, "your feelings—no doubt you are in many minds!"

"Ah, yes; I never settled anything without Ermine, and she will not help me now. And she has been so worn with the excitement and anxiety of all this long detention of yours, that I don't dare to say a word that could prey on her."

"In fact, you would chiefly be decided by Edward's own wishes."

"If I were sure of them," sighed poor Alison; "but he lives on experiments, and can hardly detach himself from them even to attend to Ermine herself. I don't know whether we should be a comfort or a burthen, and he would be afraid to hurt our feelings by telling the truth. I have been longing to consult you who have seen him at that place in Russia."

“And indeed, Ailie, he is so wedded to smoke and calculations, and so averse to this sublunary world, that though your being with him might be beneficial, still I greatly question whether the risk of carrying poor little Rose to so remote a place in such a climate, would be desirable. If he were pining to have a home made for him, it would be worth doing ; as it is, the sacrifice would be disproportioned.”

“It would be no sacrifice if he only wanted us.”

“Where you are wanted is here. Ermine wants you. I want you. The Temples want you.”

“Now, Colin, tell me truly. Edward feels as I do, and Dr. Long spoke seriously of it. Will not my present position do you and Ermine harm among your friends ?”

“With no friend we wish to make or keep !”

“If I do remain,” continued Alison, “it must be as I am. I would not live upon you, even if you asked me, which you have too much sense to do ; and though dear Lady Temple is everything to me, and wants me to forget that I am her governess, that would be a mere shuffle, but if it is best for you that I should give it up, and go out, say so at once.”

“Best for me to have eight Temples thrown on my hands, all in despair ? To have you at Myrtlewood is an infinite relief to me, both on their account and Ermine’s. You should not suspect a penniless Scotsman of such airs, Ailie.”

“Not you, Colin, but your family.”

“Isabel Menteith thinks a glass-blower was your father, and Mauleverer your brother, so yours is by far the most respectable profession. No, indeed, my family might be thankful to have any one in it who could do as you have done.”

Alison’s scruples were thus disposed of, and when Edward’s

brain cleared itself from platinum, he showed himself satisfied with the decision, though he insisted on henceforth sending home a sum sufficient for his daughter's expenses, and once said something that could be construed into a hope of spending a quiet old age with her and his sister ; but at present he was manifestly out of his clement, and was bent on returning to Ekaterinburg immediately after the marriage.

His presence was but a qualified pleasure. Naturally shy and absent, his broken spirits and removal from domestic life, and from society, had exaggerated his peculiarities ; and under the pressure of misfortune, caused in a great measure by his own negligence, he had completely given way, without a particle of his sister's patience or buoyancy, and had merely striven to drown his troubles in engrossing problems of his favourite pursuit, till the habit of abstraction had become too confirmed to be shaken off. When the blot on his name was removed, he was indeed sensible that he was no longer an exile, but he could not resume his old standing ; friendships rudely severed could not be re-united ; his absorption had grown by indulgence ; old interests had passed away ; needful conformity to social habits was irksome, and even his foreign manner and appearance testified to his entire unfitness for English life.

Tibbie was in constant dread of his burning the house down, so incalculable and preposterous were his hours, and the Colonel, longing to render the house a perfect shrine for his bride, found it hard to tolerate the fumes with which her brother saturated it. If he had been sure that opium formed no portion of Edward's solace, his counsel to Alison would have been less decisive. To poor little Rose, her father was an abiding perplexity and distress ; she wanted to love him,

and felt it absolute naughtiness to be constantly disappointed by his insensibility to her approaches, or else repelled and disgusted by that vice of the Russian sheep. And a vague hint of being transported to the Ural mountains, away from Aunt Ermine, had haunted her of late more dreadfully than even the lions of old ; so that the relief was ineffable when her dear Colonel confided to her that she was to be his niece and Aunt Ermine's handmaid, sent her to consult with Tibbie on her new apartment, and invited Augustus to the most eligible hole in the garden. The grotto that Rose, Conrade, and Francis proceeded to erect with pebbles and shells, was likely to prove as alarming to that respectable reptile as a model cottage to an Irish peasant.

Ermine had dropped all scruples about Rose's intercourse with other children, and the feeling that she might associate with them on equal terms, perhaps, was the most complete assurance of Edward's restoration. She was glad that companionship should render the little maiden more active and childlike, for Edward's abstraction had made her believe that there might be danger in indulging the dreaminess of the imaginative child.

No one welcomed the removal of these restraints more warmly than Lady Temple. She was perhaps the happiest of the happy, for with her there was no drawback, no sorrow, no parting to fear. Her first impulse, when Colonel Keith came to tell her his plans, was to seize on hat and shawl, and rush down to Mackarel Lane to kiss Ermine with all her heart, and tell her that "it was the most delightful thing of her to have consented at last, for nobody deserved so well to be happy as that dear Colonel ;" and then she clung to Alison, declaring that now she should have her all to herself, and if

she would only come to Myrtlewood, she would do her very best to make her comfortable there, and it should be her home—her home always.

“In fact,” said Ermine, afterwards to the Colonel, “when you go to Avonchester, I think you may as well get a licence for the wedding of Alison Williams and Fanny Temple at the same time. There has been quite a courtship on the lady’s part.”

The courtship had been the more ardent from Fanny’s alarm lest the brother should deprive her of Alison; and when she found her fears groundless, she thanked him with such fervour, and talked so eagerly of his sister’s excellences that she roused him into a lucid interval, in which he told Colonel Keith that Lady Temple might give him an idea of the style of woman that Lucy had been. Indeed, Colin began to think that it was as well that he was so well wrapped up in smoke and chemistry, otherwise another might have been added to the list of Lady Temple’s hopeless adorers.

The person least satisfied was Tibbie, who could not get over the speediness of the marriage, nor forgive the injury to Miss Williams; “of bringing her hame like any pleughman’s wife, wantin’ a honeymoon trip, forbye providin’ hersel’ with weddin’ braws conformable. Gin folk tak’ sic daft notions aff the English, they’d be mair wise like to bide at hame, an’ that’s my way o’ thinkin’.”

Crusty as she was, there was no danger of her not giving her warmest welcome; and thus the morning came. Tibbie had donned her cap, with white satin ribbons, and made of lace once belonging to the only heiress who had ever brought wealth to the Keiths. Edward Williams, all his goods packed up, had gone to join his sisters, and the Colonel, only

perceptibly differing from his daily aspect in having a hat free from crape, was opening all the windows in hopes that a thorough draft would remove the last of the tobacco, when the letters were brought in, and among them one of the black bordered bulletins from Littleworthy, which ordinarily arrived by the second post. It was a hurried note, evidently dashed off to catch the morning mail.

MY DEAR COLONEL,—Alick tells me to write in haste to catch the morning post, and beg you to telegraph the instant your wedding is over. The doctors see cause to hasten their measures, but your brother will have nothing done till the will is signed. He and Alick both desire you will not come, but it is getting to be far too much for Alick. I would tell you more if there were time before the post goes. Love to dear Ermine.

Very sincerely yours,

R. KEITH.

There was so shocked and startled a look on Colin's face, that Tibbie believed that his brother must be dead, and when in a few almost inaudible words he told her that he must start for Bishopsworthy by the afternoon train, she fairly began to scold, partly by way of working off the irritation left by her alarm. "The lad's clean demented! Heard ye ever the like, to rin awa' frae his new-made wife afore the blessin's been weel spoke; an' a' for the whimsie of that daft English lassie that made sicc an' a piece of work wi' her cantrips."

"I am afraid she is right now," said the Colonel, "and my brother must not be left any longer."

"Hout awa', Maister Colin, his lordship has come between you and your luve oft enough already, without partin' ye at

the very church door. Ye would na have the English cast up to us, that one of your name did na ken better what was fittin by his bride!"

"My bride must be the judge, Tibbie. You shall see whether she bids me stay," said Colin, a little restored by his amusement at her anxiety for his honour among the English. "Now desire Smith to meet me at the church door, and ride at once from thence to Avoncester; and get your face ready to give a cheerful welcome, Tibbie. Let her have that, at least, whatever may come after."

Tibbie looked after him, and shook her head, understanding from her ain laddie's pallid cheek, and resolute lip, nay, in the very sound of his footfall, how sore was his trial, and with one-sided compassion she muttered, "Telegrafted awa on his vera weddin' day. His Lordship 'll be the death o' them baith before he's done."

As it was in every way desirable that the wedding should be unexpected by Avonmouth in general, it was to take place at the close of the ordinary morning service, and Ermine in her usual seat within the vestry, was screened from knowing how late was Colin's entrance, or seeing the determined composure that would have to her eyes betrayed how much shaken he was. He was completely himself again by the time the congregation dispersed, leaving only Grace Curtis, Lady Temple, and the little best man, Conrade, a goodly sight in his grey suit and scarlet hose. Then came the slow movement from the vestry, the only really bridal-looking figure being Rose in white muslin and white ribbons; walking timidly and somewhat in awe beside her younger aunt; while her father upheld and guided the elder. Both were in quiet, soft, dark dresses, and straw bonnets, but over hers Ermine

wore the small though exquisite Brussels lace veil that had first appeared at her mother's wedding ; and thankful joy and peaceful awe looked so lovely on her noble brow, deep, soft dark eyes, and the more finely moulded, because somewhat worn, features ; and so beauitously deepened was the carnation on her cheek, that Mr. Mitchell ever after maintained that he had never married any one to compare with that thirty-three years' old bride upon crutches, and, as he reported to his wife, in no dress at all.

Her brother, who supported her all the time she stood, was infinitely more nervous than she was. Her native grace and dignity, and absence of all false shame entirely covered her helplessness ; and in her earnestness, she had no room for confusion ; her only quivering of voice was caught for one moment from the tremulous intensity of feeling that Colin Keith could not wholly keep from thrilling in his tones, as he at last proclaimed his right to love and to cherish her for whom he had so long persevered.

Unobserved, he filled up the half-written despatch with the same pen with which he signed the register, and sent Conrade to the door with it to his already mounted messenger. Then assuming Edward's place as Ermine's supporter, he led her to the door, seated her in her wheeled chair, and silently handing Rachel's note as his explanation to Alison, he turned away, and walked alone by Ermine's side to his own house. Still silent, he took her into the bright drawing-room he had so long planned for her, and seated her in her own peculiar chair. Then his first words were, "Thank God for this ! "

She knew his face. "Colin, your brother is worse ?" He bent his head, he could not speak.

"And you have to go to him ! This very day ?"

“Ermine, you must decide. You are at last my first duty!”

“That means that you know you ought to go. Tell me what it is.”

He told the substance of the note, ending with, “If you could come with me !”

“I would if I should not be a tie and hindrance. No, I must not do that ; but here I am, Colin, here I am. And it is all true—it has all come right at last ! All we waited for. Nothing has ever been like this.”

She was the stronger. Tears, as much of loving thankfulness as of overflowing disappointment, rushed into his eyes at such a fulfilment of the purpose that he had carried with him by sea and land, in battle and sickness, through all the years of his manhood. And withal her one thought was to infuse in its strongest measure the drop of happiness that was to sustain him through the scenes that awaited him, to make him feel her indeed his wife, and to brighten him with the sunbeam face that she knew had power to cheer him. Rallying her playfulness, she took off her bonnet, and said, as she settled her hair, “There, that is being at home ! Take my shawl, yes, and these white gloves, and put them out of sight, that I may not feel like a visitor, and that you may see how I shall look when you come back. Do you know, I think your being out of the way will be rather a gain, for there will be a tremendous feminine bustle with the flitting of our possessions.”

Her smile awoke a responsive look, and she began to gaze round and admire, feeling it safest to skim on the surface ; and he could not but be gratified by her appreciation of the pains spent upon this, her especial home. He had recovered

himself again by the time these few sentences had passed ; they discussed the few needful arrangements required by his departure, and Tibbie presently found them so cheerful that she was quite scandalized, and when Ermine held out her hands, saying, “ What Tibbie, won’t you come and kiss me, and wish me joy ? ” she exclaimed—

“ Wish ye joy ! It’s like me to wish ye joy an yer lad hurled awa frae yer side i’ the blink o’ an ee, by thae wild telegrams. I dinna see what joy’s to come o’t ; it’s clean again the Scripture ! ”

“ I told you I had left it to her to decide, Tibbie,” said the Colonel.

“ Weel, an what wad ye hae the puir leddy say ? She kens what sorts ye, when the head of yer name is sick an lyin’ among thae English loons that hae brocht him to siccan a pass.”

“ Right, Tibbie,” exclaimed Ermine, greatly amused at the unexpected turn, purely for the sake of putting Maister Colin in the wrong. “ If a gentleman won’t be content without a bride who can’t walk, he must take the consequence, and take his wedding trip by himself ! It is my belief, Tibbie, as I have just been telling him, that you and I shall get the house in all the better order for having him off our hands, just at first,” she added, with a look of intelligence.

“ Deed, an maybe we shall,” responded Tibbie, with profound satisfaction. “ He was aye a camsteary child when there was any wark on hand.”

Colin could not help laughing, and when once this had been effected, Ermine felt that his depression had been sufficiently met, and that she might venture on deeper, and more serious sympathy, befitting the chastened, thankful

feelings with which they hailed the crowning of their youthful love, the fulfilment of the hopes and prayers that the one had persisted in through doubt and change, the other had striven to resign into the All-wise Hands.

They had an early meal together, chiefly for the sake of his wheeling her to the head of his table, and "seeing how she looked there," and then the inexorable hour was come, and he left her, with the echo of her last words in his ear, "Goodbye, Colin, stay as long as you ought. It will make the meeting all the sweeter, and you have your wife to come back to now. Give a sister's love to your brother, and thanks for having spared you;" and his last look at the door was answered with her sunshiny smile.

But when, a few minutes after, Edward came up with Alison for his farewell, they found her lying back in her chair, half fainting, and her startled look told almost too plainly that she had not thought of her brother. "Never mind," said Edward, affectionately, as much to console Alison as Ermine for this oblivion; "of course it must be so, and I don't deserve otherwise. Nothing brought me home but Colin Keith's telling me that he saw you would not have him till my character was cleared up; and now he has repaired so much of the evil I did you, all I can do is to work to make it up to you in other ways. Goodbye, Ermine, I leave you all in much better hands than mine ever were, you are right enough in feeling that a week of his absence outweighs a year of mine. Bless you for all that you and he have done for my child. She, at least, is a comfort to you."

Ermine's powers were absolutely exhausted; she could only answer him by embraces and tears; and all the rest of the day she was, to use her own expression, "good for

nothing but to be let alone." Nor, though she exerted herself that she might with truth write that she was well and happy, was she good for much more on the next, and her jealous guardians allowed her to see no one but soft, fondling Lady Temple ; who insisted on a relationship (through Rachel), and whose tender pensive quietness could not fail to be refreshment to the strained spirits, and wearied physical powers, and who better than anybody could talk of the Colonel ; nay, who could understand, and even help Ermine herself to understand, that these ever-welling tears came from a source by no means akin to grief or repining.

The whole aspect of the rooms was full of tokens of his love and thought for her. The ground-floor had been altered for her accommodation, the furniture chosen in accordance with her known tastes or with old memories, all undemonstratively prepared while yet she had not decided on her consent. And what touched her above all, was the collection of treasures that he had year by year gathered together for her throughout the weary waiting, purchases at which Lady Temple remembered her mother's banter, with his quiet evasions of explanation. No wonder Ermine laid her head on her hand, and could not retain her tears, as she recalled the white, dismayed face of the youth, who had printed that one sad earnest kiss on her brow, as she lay fire-seathed and apparently dying ; and who had cherished the dream unbroken and unwaveringly, had denied himself consistently, had garnered up these choice tokens when ignorant even whether she still lived ; had relied on her trust, and come back, heart-whole, to claim and win her, undaunted by her crippled state, her poverty, and her brother's blotted name. " How can such love ever be met ? Why am I favoured beyond

all I could have dared to image to myself?" she thought, and wept again; because, as she murmured to Fanny, "I do thank God for it with all my heart, and I do long to tell him all. I don't think my married life ought to begin by being sillier than ever I was before, but I can't help it."

"And I do love you so much the better for it," said Fanny; a better companion to-day than the grave, strong Alison, who would have been kind, but would have had to suppress some marvel at the break down, and some resentment that Edward had no greater share in it.

The morning's post brought her the first letter from her husband, and in the midst of all her anxiety as to the contents, she could not but linger a moment on the aspect of the Honourable Mrs. Colin Keith in his handwriting; there was a carefulness in the penmanship that assured her that, let him have to tell her what he would, the very inditing of that address had been enjoyment to him. That the border was black told nothing, but the intelligence was such as she had been fully prepared for. Colin had arrived to find the surgeon's work over, but the patient fast sinking. Even his recognition of his brother had been uncertain, and within twenty-four hours of the morning that had given Colin a home of his own, the last remnant of the home circle of his childhood had passed from him.

Still Ermine had to continue a widowed bride for full a fortnight, whilst the funeral and subsequent arrangements necessitated Colin's presence in Scotland. It was on a crisp, beautiful October evening that Rose, her chesnut hair flying about her brow, stood, lighted up by the sunbeams in the porch, with upraised face and outstretched hands, and as the Colonel bent down to receive her joyous embrace, said,

“Aunt Ermine gave me leave to bring you to the door. Then I am going to Myrtlewood till bed-time. And after that I shall always have you.”

The open door showed Ermine, too tremulous to trust to her crutch, but leaning forward, her eyes liquid with tears of thankfulness. The patient spirits had reached their home and haven, the earthly haven of loving hearts, the likeness of the heavenly haven, and as her head leant, at last, upon his shoulder, and his guardian arm encircled her, there was such a sense of rest and calm that even the utterance of their inward thanksgiving, or of a word of tenderness would have jarred upon them. It was not till a knock and message at the door interrupted them, that they could break the blessed stillness.

“And there you are, my Ermine!” said Colin, standing on the hearth-rug, and surveying her with satisfied eyes. “You are a queenly looking dame in your black draperies, and you look really well, much better than Rachel led me to expect.”

“Ah! when she was here I had no fixed day to look forward to. And receiving our poor little orphan baby was not exactly like receiving his uncle, though Rachel seemed to think it ought to make up for anything.”

“She was thoroughly softened by that child! It was a spirited thing her bringing him down here on the Monday when we started for Scotland, and then coming all the way alone with her maid. I did not think Alick would have consented, but he said she would always be the happier for having deposited her charge in your hands.”

“It was a great wrench to her. I felt it like robbery when she put the little fellow down on my lap and knelt over him, not able to get herself away, but saying that she

was not fit to have him ; she could not bear it if she made him hate her as Conrade did ! I am glad she has had his first smile, she deserves it.”

“ Is Tibbie in charity with him ?”

“ Oh, more than in charity ! She did not take the first announcement of his coming very amiably ; but when I told her she was to reign in the nursery, and take care the poor little chief knew the sound of a Scots’ tongue, she began to thaw ; and when he came into the house, pity or loyalty, or both, flamed up hotly, and have quite relieved me ; for at first she made a baby of me, and was a perfect dragon of jealousy at poor Ailie’s doing anything for me. It was a rich scene when Rachel began giving her directions out of ‘ Hints for the Management of Infants,’ just in the old voice, and Tibbie swept round indignantly, ‘ His Lordship, Lord Keith of Gowanbrae, suld hae the best tendance she could gie him. She did na lippen to thae English buiks, as though she couldna rear a wean without buik learning.’ Poor Rachel nearly cried, and was not half comforted by my promising to study the book as much as she pleased.”

“ It will never do to interfere with Tibbie, and I own I am much of her opinion, I had rather trust to her than to Rachel, or the book !”

“ Well, the more Rachel talked book, the more amiable surprise passed between her mother and Lady Temple that the poor little fellow should have lived at all, and I believe they were very angry with me for thinking her views very sensible. Lady Temple is so happy with him. She says it is so melancholy to have a house without a baby, that she comes in twice or three times a day to console herself with this one.”

"Did you not tell me that she and the Curtises spent the evening with you?"

"Yes, it was rather shocking to receive them without you, but it was the only way of being altogether on Rachel's one evening here ; and it was very amusing, Mrs. Curtis so happy with her daughter looking well and bright, and Rachel with so much to tell about Bishopsworthy, till at last Grace, in her sly odd way, said she thought dear Alexander had even taught Rachel curatolatry ; whereupon Rachel fired up at such an idea being named in connexion with Mr. Clare ; then came suddenly, and very prettily, down, and added, 'Living with Alick and Mr. Clare has taught me what nonsense I talked in those days.'"

"Well done, Rachel ! It proves what Alick always said, that her great characteristic is candour !"

"I hope she was not knocked up by the long night journey all at one stretch. Mrs. Curtis was very uneasy about it, but nothing would move her ; she owned that Alick did not expect her, for she had taken care he should not object, by saying nothing of her intention, but she was sure he would be ill on Wednesday morning, and then Mrs. Curtis not only gave in directly, but all we married women turned upon poor Grace for hinting that Alick might prefer a day's solitary illness to her being over-tired."

"She was extremely welcome ! Alick was quite done for by all he had gone through ; he was miserably ill, and I hardly knew what to do with him, and he mended from the moment his face lightened up at the sight of her."

"There's the use of strength of mind ! How is Alick ?"

"Getting better under M'Vicar and Edinburgh winds. It was hard on him to have borne the brunt of all the nursing

that terrible last week, and in fact I never knew how much he was going through rather than summon me. His sauntering manner always conceals how much he is doing, and poor Keith was so fond of him, and liked his care so much that almost the whole fell upon him at last. And I believe he said more that was good for Keith, and brought in Mr. Clare more than perhaps I should ever have been able to do. So though I must regret having been away, it may have been the best thing."

"And it was by your brother's earnest wish," said Ermine ; "it was not as if you had stayed away for your own pleasure."

"No ! Poor Keith repeatedly said he could not die in peace till he had secured our having the sole charge of his son. It was a strong instinct that conquered inveterate prejudice ! Did I tell you about the will ?"

"You said I should hear particulars when you came."

"The personal guardianship is left to us first, then to Alick and Rachel, with £300 a year for the expenses. Then we have Auchinvar. The estate is charged with an equivalent settlement upon Mary, a better plan, which I durst not propose, but with so long a minority the estate will bear it. Alick has his sister's fortune back again, and the Menteith children a few hundreds ; but Menteith is rabid about the guardianship, and would hardly speak to Alick."

"And you ?"

"They always keep the peace with me. Isabel even made us a wedding present—a pair of miniatures of my father and mother, that I am very glad to rescue, though, as she politely told me, I was welcome to them, for they were hideously dressed, and she wanted the frames for two sweet photographs of Garibaldi and the Queen of Naples."

Then looking up as if to find a place for them—

“Why, Ermine, what have you done to the room? It is the old parsonage drawing-room!”

“Did not you mean it, when you took the very proportions of the bay window, and chose just such a carpet?”

“But what have you done to it?”

“Ailie and Rose, and Lady Temple and her boys, have done it. I have sat looking on, and suggesting. Old things that we kept packed up have seen the light, and your beautiful Indian curiosities have found their corners.”

“And the room has exactly the old geranium scent!”

“I think the Curtises must have brought half their greenhouse down. Do you remember the old oak-leaf geranium that you used to gather a leaf of whenever you passed our old conservatory?”

“I have been wondering where the fragrance came from that made the likeness complete. I have smelt nothing like it since!”

“I said that I wished for one, and Grace set off without a word, and searched everywhere at Avonchester till she found one in a corner of the Dean’s greenhouse. There, now you have a leaf in your fingers, I think you do feel at home.”

“Not quite, Ermine. It still has the dizziness of a dream. I have so often conjured up all this as a vision, that now there is nothing to take me away from it, I can hardly feel it a reality.”

“Then I shall ring. Tibbie and the poor little Lord upstairs are substantial witnesses to the cares and troubles of real life.”

CHAPTER XVI.

WHO IS THE CLEVER WOMAN?

“ Half-grown as yet, a child and vain,
She cannot fight the fight of death.
What is she cut from love and faith ? ”

Knowledge and Wisdom, TENNYSON.

IT was long before the two Mrs. Keiths met again. Mrs. Curtis and Grace were persuaded to spend the spring and summer in Scotland, and Alick's leave of absence was felt to be due to Mr. Clare, and thus it was that the first real family gathering took place on occasion of the opening of the institution that had grown out of the Burnaby Bargain. This work had cost Colonel Keith and Mr. Mitchell an infinity of labour and perseverance before even the preliminaries could be arranged, but they contrived at length to carry it out, and by the fourth spring after the downfall of the F. U. E. E. a house had been erected for the convalescents, whose wants were to be attended to by a matron, assisted by a dozen young girls in training for service.

The male convalescents were under the discipline of Sergeant O'Brien, and the whole was to be superintended by Colonel and Mrs. Keith. Ermine undertook to hear a class of the girls two or three times a week, and lower rooms had been constructed with a special view to her being wheeled into them, so as to visit the convalescents, and give them her attention and sympathy. Mary Morris was head girl, most

of the others were from Avonmouth, but two pale Londoners came from Mr. Touchett's district, and a little motherless lassie from the —th Highlanders was brought down with the nursery establishment, on which Mrs. Alexander Keith now practised the "Hints on the management of Infants."

May was unusually propitious, and after an orthodox tea-drinking, the new pupils and all the Sunday-schools were turned out to play on the Homestead slopes, with all the world to look on at them. It was a warm, brilliant day, of joyous blossom and lively green, and long laughing streaks of sunlight on the sea, and no one enjoyed it more than did Ermine, as she sat in her chair delighting in the fresh sweetness of the old thorns, laughing at the freaks of the scampering groups of children, gaily exchanging pleasant talk with one friend after another; and most of all with Rachel, who seemed to gravitate back to her whenever any summons had for a time interrupted their affluence of conversation.

And all the time Ermine's footstool was serving as a table for the various flowers that two children were constantly gathering in the grass and presenting to her, to Rachel, or to each other, with a constant stream of not very comprehensible prattle, full of pretty gesticulation that seemed to make up for the want of distinctness. The yellow-haired, slenderly-made, delicately-featured boy, whose personal pronouns were just developing, and his consonants very scanty, though the elder of the two, dutifully and admiringly obeyed the more distinct, though less connected, utterances of the little dark-eyed girl, eked out by pretty imperious gestures, that seemed already to enchain the little white-frocked cavalier to her service. All the time it was droll to see how the two ladies

could pay full attention to the children, while going on with their own unbroken stream of talk.

“I am not overwhelming you,” suddenly exclaimed Rachel, checking herself in mid-career about the mothers’ meetings for the soldiers’ wives.

“Far from it. Was I inattentive——?”

“Oh no—(Yes, Una dear, very pretty)—but I found myself talking in the voice that always makes Alick shut his eyes.”

“I should not think he often had to do so,” said Ermine, much amused by this gentle remedy—(“Mind, Keith, that is a nettle. It will sting—”)

“Less often than before,” said Rachel—(“Never mind the butterfly, Una)—I don’t think I have had more than one thorough fit of what he calls leaping into the gulf. It was about the soldiers’ wives married without leave, who, poor things, are the most miserable creatures in the world; and when I first found out about them I was in the sort of mood I was in about the lace, and raved about the system, and was resolved to employ one poor woman, and Alick looked meeker and mecker, and assented to all I said, as if he was half asleep, and at last he quietly took up a sheet of paper, and said he must write and sell out, since I was bent on my gulf, and an officer’s wife must be bound by the regulations of the service. I was nearly as bad as ever; I could have written an article on the injustice of the army regulations, indeed I did begin, but what do you think the end was? I got a letter from a good lady, who is always looking after the poor, to thank Mrs. Alexander Keith for the help that had been sent for this poor woman, to be given as if from the general fund. After that I could not help listening to him,

and then I found it was so impossible to know about character, or to be sure that one was not doing more harm than—What is it, boys ?” as three or four Temples rushed up.

“Aunt Rachel, Mr. Clare is going to teach us a new game, and he says you know it. Pray come.”

“Come, Una. What, Keith, will you come too? I’ll take care of him, Ermine.”

And with a child in each hand Rachel followed the deputation, and had scarcely disappeared before the light gracious figure of Rose glanced through the thorn trees. “Aunt Ermine, you must come nearer; it is so wonderful to see Mr. Clare teaching this game.”

“Don’t push my chair, my dear; it is much too heavy for you uphill.”

“As if I could not drive you anywhere, and here is Conrade coming.”

Conrade was in search of the deserter, but he applied himself heartily to the propulsion of aunt Ermine, informing Rose that Mr. Clare was no end of a man, much better than if he could see, and aunt Rachel was grown quite jolly.

“I think she has left off her long words,” said Rose.

“She is not a civilian now,” said Conrade, quite unconscious of Ermine’s amusement at his confidences as he pushed behind her. “I did think it a most benighted thing to marry her, but that’s what it is. Military discipline has made her conformable.” Having placed the chair on a spot which commanded the scene, the boy and girl rushed off to take their part in the sport, leaving Ermine looking down a steep bank at the huge ring of performers, with linked hands, advancing and receding to the measure of a chanted verse

round a figure in the centre, who made gesticulations, pursued and caught different individuals in the ring, and put them through a formula which provoked shouts of mirth. Ermine much enjoyed the sight ; it was pretty to watch the *prononcé* dresses of the parish children, interspersed with the more graceful forms of the little gentry, and here and there a taller lady. Then Ermine smiled to recognise Alison as usual among her boys, and Lady Temple's soft greys and whites, and gentle floating movements, as she advanced and receded with Stephana in one hand, and a shy infant school-child in the other. But Ermine's eye roamed anxiously ; for though Rachel's animated, characteristic gestures were fully discernible, and her little Una's arch toss of the head marked her out, yet the companion whom she had beguiled away, and who had become more to Ermine than any other of the frisking little ones of the flock, was neither with her nor with his chief protector, Rose. In a second or two, however, the step that to her had most "music in't" of all footfalls that ever were trodden, was sounding on the path that led circuitously up the path, and the Colonel appeared with the little runaway holding his hand.

"Why, baby, you are soon come away !"

"I did not like it,—sit on mamma's knee," said the little fellow, scrambling to his place then as one who felt it his own nest and throne.

"He was very soon frightened," said the Colonel ; "it was only that little witch Una who could have deluded him into such a crowd, and, as soon as she saw a bigger boy to beguile, she instantly deserted Keith, so I relieved Rachel of him."

"See Rachel now ; Mr. Clare is interrogating her. How

she is making them laugh! I did not think she could ever have so entered into fun."

"Alick must have made it a part of her education. When the Invalid has time for another essay, Ermine, it should be on the Benefits of Ridicule."

"Against Clever Womanhood? But then the subject must have Rachel's perfect good humour."

"And the weapon must be in the most delicately skilful hands," added the Colonel. "Properly wielded, it saves blunting the superior weapon by over-frequent use. Here the success is complete."

"It has been irony rather than ridicule," said Ermine, "though, when he taught her to laugh, he won half the battle. It is beautiful to see her holding herself back, and most forbearing where she feels most positive. I am glad to see him looking so much stronger and more substantial. Where is he?"

"On the further bank, supposed by Mrs. Curtis to be asleep, but watching uncle, wife, and child through his eyelashes. Did you ever see any one so like his sister as that child?"

"Much more so than this one. I am glad he may one day see such a shadow of his bright-faced mother."

"You are mother!" said the little orphan, looking up into Ermine's face with a startled, wistful look, as having caught more of her meaning than she had intended, and she met his look with a kiss, the time was not yet come for gainsaying the belief more than in the words, "Yes, always a mother to you, my precious little man."

"Nor could you have had a bonnier face to look into," added the Colonel. "There, the game breaks up. We should

collect our flock, and get them back to Les Invalides, as Alick calls it."

"Take care no one else does so," said Ermine, laughing. "It has been a most happy day, and chief of all the pleasures has been the sight of Rachel just what I hoped, a thorough wife and mother, all the more so for her being awake to larger interests, and doing common things better for being the Clever Woman of the family. Where is she? I don't see her now."

Where is she? was asked by more than one of the party, but the next to see her was Alick, who found her standing at the window of her own room, with her long-robed, two-months old baby in her arms. "Tired?" he asked.

"No; I only sent down nurse to drink tea with the other grandes. What a delightful day it has been! I never hoped that such good fruit would rise out of my unhappy blunders."

"The blunders that brought so much good to me."

"Ah! the old places bring them back again. I have been recollecting how it used to seem to me the depth of my fall that you were marrying me out of pure pity, without my having the spirit to resent or prevent it; and now I just like to think how kind and noble it was in you."

"I am glad to hear it! I thought I was so foolishly in love, that I was very glad of any excuse for pressing it on."

"Are the people dispersing? Where is your uncle?"

"He went home with the Colonel and his wife; he has quite lost his heart to Ermine."

"And Una—did you leave her with Grace?"

"No; she trotted down hand in hand with his little lordship; promising to lead her uncle back."

“ My dear Alick, you don’t mean that you trust to that ? ”

“ Why, hardly implicitly.”

“ Is that the way you say so ? They may be both over the cliffs. If you will just stay in the room with baby, I will go down and fetch them up.”

Alick very obediently held out his arms for his son, but when Rachel proceeded to take up her hat, he added, “ You have run miles enough to-day. I am going down as soon as my uncle has had time to pay his visit in peace, without being hunted.”

“ Does he know that ? ”

“ The Colonel does, which comes to the same thing. Is not this boy just of the age that little Keith was when you gave him up ? ”

“ Yes ; and is it not delightful to see how much larger and heavier he is ! ”

“ Hardly, considering your objections to fine children.”

“ Oh, that was only to coarse, over-grown ones. Una is really quite as tall as little Keith, and much more active. You saw he could not play at the game at all, and she was all life and enjoyment, with no notion of shyness.”

“ It does not enter into her composition.”

“ And she speaks much plainer. I never miss a word she says, and I don’t understand Keith a bit, though he tells such long stories.”

“ How backward ! ”

“ Then she knows all her letters by sight—almost all, and Ermine can never get him to tell *b* from *d* ; and you *know* how she can repeat so many little verses, while he could not even say, ‘ Thank you, pretty cow,’ this morning, when I wanted to hear him.”

“Vast interval !”

“It is only eight months ; but then Una is such a bright, forward child.”

“Highly-developed precocity !”

“Now, Alick, what am I about ? Why are you agreeing with me ?”

“I am between the horns of a dilemma. Either our young chieftain must be a dunce, or we are rearing the Clever Woman of the family.”

“I hope not !” exclaimed Rachel.

“Indeed ? I would not grudge her a superior implement, even if I had sometimes cut my own fingers.”

“But, Alick, I really do not think I ever was such a Clever Woman.”

“I never thought you one,” he quietly returned.

She smiled. This faculty had much changed her countenance. “I see,” she said, thoughtfully, “I had a few intellectual tastes, and liked to think and read, which was supposed to be cleverness ; and my wilfulness made me fancy myself superior in force of character, in a way I could never have imagined if I had lived more in the world. Contact with really clever people has shown me that I am slow and unready.”

“It was a rusty implement, and you tried weight instead of edge. Now it is infinitely brighter.”

“But, Alick,” she said, leaving the thought of herself for that of her child, “I believe you may be right about Una ; for,” she added in low voice, “she is like the most practically clever person I ever saw.”

“True,” he answered gravely, “I see it every day, in every saucy gesture and coaxing smile, when she tries to turn away

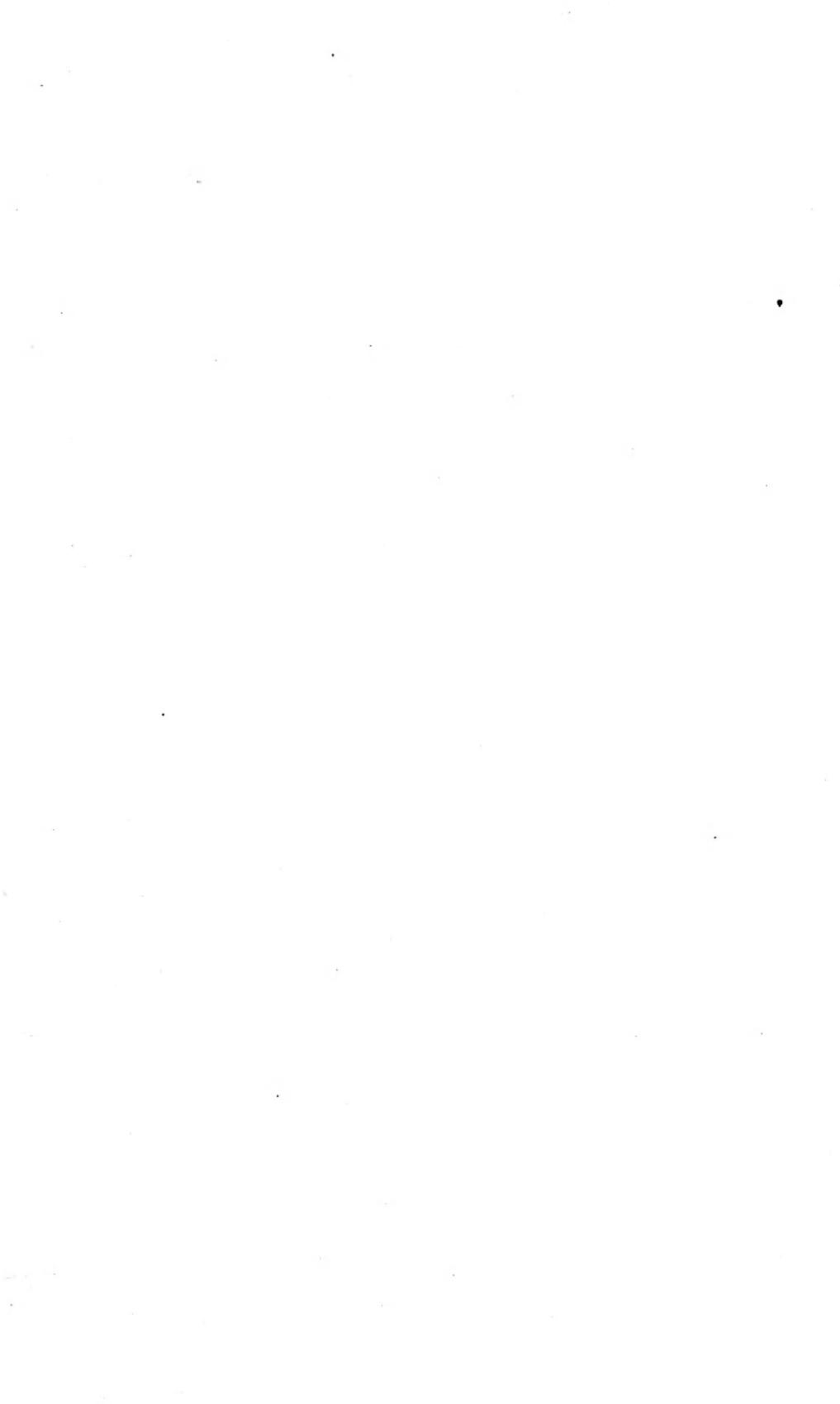
displeasure in her naughty fits. I hardly knew how to look on at her airs with Keith, it was so exactly like the little sister I first knew. Rachel, such cleverness as that is a far more perilous gift to woman than your plodding intellectuality could ever be. God grant," he added, with one of the effusions which sometimes broke through his phlegmatic temperament, "that this little fellow may be a kinder, wiser brother than ever I was, and that we may bring her up to your own truth and unselfishness. Then such power would be a happy endowment."

"Yes," said Rachel, "may she never be out of your influence, or be left to untrustworthy hands. I should have been much better if I had had either father or brother to keep me in order. Poor child, she has a wonderful charm, not all my fancy, Alick. And yet there is one whose real working talent has been more than that of any of us, who has made it effective for herself and others, and has let it do her only good, not harm."

"You are right. If we are to show Una how intellect and brilliant power can be no snares, but only blessings helping the spirits in infirmity and trouble, serving as a real engine for independence and usefulness, winning love and influence for good, genuine talents in the highest sense of the word, then commend me to such a Clever Woman of the family as Ermine Keith."

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